

An Interview with ALAN J. PAKULA  
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# Cinemonkey

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# Notes

Stanley Kauffmann said it all in the lead to his review of *A Wedding* (*New Republic*, 23 September 1978, pages 26-27): "Now Robert Altman has found a new way to insult his profession." Kauffmann has become increasingly more interesting to us in the recent past, for his quirky, personal, and casual writing style. I don't think many critics hold up to a survey of their columns at one sitting: Sarris and Simon do, Kael and Schickel don't (for this reader, anyway). Kauffmann does. Though he is one of those reviewers that one is not supposed to like, as dictated by the invisible network of film do's-and-don'ts, reading his most recent collection, *Living Images* (Harper and Row) has for me been a delightful and refreshing experience. He actually enjoys movies, although those I've talked to about him have the impression, not based on actual exposure, that he does not. Yet he is one of the few majors that wrote positively of *CE3K*, which was also one of the best reviews I've ever read of any movie (*New Republic*, 10 December 1977, Pages 20-22).

Also interesting was Roger Greenspun's consideration of the science fiction film in *Penthouse*. I've liked him ever since that wonderful piece in *Film Comment* on getting fired by the *New York Times*, which had a great *Scanlons*-esque muckraking air to it. Unfortunately we don't see much of him. He writes enthusiastically of Sissy Spacek in Danny Peary's Christmas gift book, *Close-ups* (Workman Publishing), which is, I'm afraid, a somewhat essential volume due to its all-encompassing nature. Especially recommended is Sergio Leone on Henry Fonda, pages 535-536.

Speaking of *CE3K*, I recommend *Jump Cut* number 18, an issue that will not make many friends among the fannish, what with its double broadside against both the Spielberg film and *Star Wars*. I think the *Star Wars* by Dan Rubey is better than the *CE3K* by Robert Entman and Francie Seymour (too many cooks, perhaps) and both of

them say more or less what you'd expect, but there is such a barrage of detail that the reader is more than overwhelmed by the fascist sub-text in the two films. I felt very naive after reading the articles. However, I still like *CE3K*, which goes to show how deeply rooted ideology is. *Jump Cut* strikes me as one of those film magazines that everyone thinks should be published but never actually read (I read every damn page of the thing), and I can see why: they don't like *anything*, unless it's some African documentary directed collectively. I urge everyone to subscribe, however, if it only allows them to switch from the old *Rolling Stone* format, to that of a real magazine, where the ink doesn't come off on your fingers. (Six dollars for four to six issues a year from *Jump Cut*, P.O. Box 865, Berkeley, CA, 94701.)

An important source volume has emerged from the Northwest Media Project in Portland, Oregon called *Oregon Film-makers: A statewide directory of film-makers and filmmaking services*. Martha Gies is Director of the Project, Melissa Marsland and David Gettman edited the book, which is essential to anyone interested in local filmmaking or who may plan to do film work in Oregon. Queries should be sent to the Northwest Media Project, P.O. Box 4093, Portland, Oregon 97208. Also available, for two dollars, is a handy pamphlet entitled, "Copyright Primer for Film and Video," by lawyer Joseph Sparkman.

In the 11 November 1978 Boston *Real Paper* is a fascinating account by Audie Bock of his stint as translator for Akira Kurosawa on his recent visit to the U.S. Visiting L.A., K (as he is called) meets Pakula, and they discuss horses; Paul and Leonard Schrader (there is mention of the Ozu-inspired shots in *Blue Collar*), Paul asking which script K found the most difficult to write; George Lucas and Irvin Kershner; and later in San Francisco he

meets Wim Wenders and Coppola, who shows him a bit of *Apocalypse Now* ("War films rarely look realistic to me, but this is the first truly frightening battle footage I've ever seen," commented K). I won't spoil all the surprise of reading the piece, which is excellent, by further quoting.

Another under-recognized magazine seems to me to be the *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* which has done some incredible work the past few years — the last number 3/3 was devoted to "the application of semiology and structuralism to practical film criticism," with excellent articles on Bunuel, Roeg, and 2001. 3/4 has a dense but interesting article by Christine Gledhill called "Recent Developments in Feminist Criticism." The address is Redgrave Publishing Company, 430 Manville Road, Pleasantville, New York, 10570. They also print the best book reviews this side of *The Velvet Light Trap*.

In my last column I discussed a popular television commercial, and this time I'd like to turn the reader's attention to a certain series, analyzing it in terms of its ritual appeal to a mass audience.

If I choose *Gilligan's Island* it is because I remember from college days an article in the school paper, a facetious Freudian analysis of the show. If I appropriate some of the article's ideas (which are very shadowy in my memory; it is not clear whose ideas are whose) it is not for the purpose of high comedy, although this effect is inevitable. At any rate it is the weekly prologue/credit sequence that is the focus of my attention.

The Skipper and Gilligan take their boat out on a charter, which consists of the Howells, Mary Ann, the Professor, and Ginger, a Marilyn Monroe parody. No logical or plot reason is given as to why all these people should be on board at the same time, but there is obvious thematic relevance in that there is a cross section, as I will show, of sexual attitudes. The ship sets



out from a sunny, crowded port. A storm comes up. The ship is tossed. Everyone ends up stranded on a deserted island. As we come to know them in the series each of the characters is a variation on the "problem" of sex, with the latently homosexual Laurel and Hardy relationship of the Skipper and Gilligan, the girl next door, the sex symbol, the sexless but rich older couple, and the intellectual (the most isolated character, having his own private hut). But why are these people trapped?

In the early sixties an upwardly mobile society, suddenly finding itself with a lot of free time and money on its hands, became sex-obsessed, and it was disconcerting for a repressed society organized around the work ethic to have to confront a leisure-time morality where sensual pleasure is the only goal. Each week the psychic turmoil beneath or near the surface of the unconscious finds answers to its anxiety in the well-known programs on television, the source of stasis also for many other anxieties. The communal unity of millions of Americans indulging all at the same time in a weekly ritual is staggering. But in what, with *Gilligan's Island*, are we indulging?

Their boat is a phallic symbol. Both Gilligan and the Skipper are sexless. On the cruise (a pleasure cruise) the ship is tossed about by a storm. In dreams the sea is a fairly constant symbol for the unconscious, or in Jungian psychology, the female principle, depending, of course, on other personality characteristics. The ship cannot handle the tempest of the sea, that is, female desire (or wrath), the female now being stirred up by the phallus. The ship is the *Minnow*, a small fish, i.e., a small penis, unable to satisfy woman. Before the cast appears on the island the last image is of the wheel spinning out of control. This symbol of psychological wholeness shows the individual out of control, "off-course" and so on. The characters end up alone on an island, which translates as: the impotence of the penis, unable to satisfy women, leads to societal isolation and asexuality. Each character shows some inability to deal with sexuality. Both the Professor and Mary Ann are ignorant of the subject (which may be why they are the "least important" members of the cast, for a long time not even named in the theme song). The Howell's have sublimated their sexual drives into greed. Ginger parodies the sex symbol, an exaggeration of desire, and hence a compensation for root incomprehension. The Skipper is the super-ego, undesirable because of his age and weight, a slight hint of the quasi-homosexual relationship of Laurel and Hardy (they are the only two men to share a hut). Gilligan is the id figure, unleashing chaos and disorder by his bumbling, but also often solving their problems. Clearly he is aware of sex, but it is the awareness of an adolescent. His red shirt suggests the essential sexual nature of his being, and he is the only one capable of climbing the periodic phallic coconut trees,



Sweet Revenge: Stockard Channing.

but he is repressed (by the affectation of sexual ignorance) and suppressed (by the Skipper).

This structure is presented each week in the credit sequence, and it is maddening in its repetition. But that repetition is crucial to the psychological lives of the viewers, however, who relish the redundancy. The credit sequences in popular shows usually have the goal of defining the character relations and engage the psychological transition to the myth-making (which is why they take up so much airtime). Sex is significant in each episode, like the dog in the Sherlock Holmes story, for the simple fact that it is never mentioned. A vision of America with provisions for the separation of the sexes. Sex is rarely even joked about, with all the leering frustration of current shows. Sex is an issue only when someone needs something and calls upon Ginger to enact a Pavlovian reward parody. In the long run this makes little sense, since no one ever makes a sexual advance to another, rendering her come-on more erratic than erotic. With the passing of post-Kennedy absurdism to the sexless seventies and selfish pursuit of vicarious pleasure, the show peaked and declined. Also, only so many plot twists can be squeezed out of the premise. We are today offered pratfalls in place of sex, and *Charlie's Angels* is like a bra with built-in nipples; one has the thrill of going braless, without the moral horror of actually doing so. Television only creates more distance between us and art, by the way it separates experience into discrete units, and we stand before art, as we stand before life, unable to understand it to such a degree we are unaware of our misunderstanding, a situation portrayed in the untitled poem by John

Litsis for which I have received permission to reprint in full:

My Master's made me standing proud,  
Shoulders arched, upon a boulder  
Wide-legged, formed of styrofoam and starch,  
With antlers curved low in a wide arc,  
Gazing at dreamy, distant things  
Beyond the heads of those who cluster near  
Reflected like a funhouse in the clarity of my  
Polished white surface.

I circle round it for a better view  
and wait for it to speak to me  
with lips of passion and repair,  
before moving on to different corners.

My diamond glitters in the ebony sheen.  
Quite talented, really.

Step, one, two, plie, step, three, four...

The 18 December issue of *New West* contains an article by Tony Peyser entitled "Please Release Me," concerning unreleased Hollywood films. I remember a similar article from an old *American Film* on this interesting subject. I also remember hearing about the newest Jerry Schatzberg film a few years ago and never seeing it. Writes Peyser: "This story of a car thief (Stockard Channing) and her lawyer (Sam Waterston) was shot on a low budget in Seattle in 1975. [*The All American Girl*] got invited to the Cannes Film Festival, where Channing was being mentioned for best actress and the film got some good reviews. A June or July release date was set for the MGM-UA production, but it never came through. Studio money was spent, however, on marketing research to determine the best possible title. After a brief interlude in which the film was called *Dandy*, the *All American Girl*, the final change was made to *Sweet Revenge*. The movie cruised through Yugoslavian and Dallas Film Festivals but coughed and wheezed to a halt in the U.S." (At the end of the article there is a list of 25 more tantalizing films buried in studio vaults.)

I have managed to find a few stills from the film, reproduced here and on the inside-back cover, in an effort to, in some small way, call for the release of this film made by a Cannes winner (for *Scarecrow*). The cast of the film includes Franklyn Ajaye and was photographed by Vilmos Zsigmond, with a script by J. Perla and Marilyn Goldin. Unfortunately I cannot assure MGM of a huge hit with the film. In fact I'm positive it would fall, just as *Corvette Summer*, another MGM film with an ironic attitude toward car culture and materialism, failed (what a double-bill!), but to keep this picture unavailable is a sad affair. I am not going to moralize at Hollywood about respecting art. After all, the place is devoted first and foremost to business. But perhaps the studios could turn these lost films over to archives and museums, for sizable tax breaks, and to bolster their collective images in the eyes of those who complain, rightfully, about the industry's complete disregard for its own past.

N.O. Grace





# SOME VERSIONS OF BILLY WILDER

By Leland Poague

It is generally acknowledged that Billy Wilder is long past due for serious and thorough re-evaluation. My purpose in these remarks is to contribute to that effort. But before going on to propose a new way of looking at Wilder and his films, I want to glance briefly backward at previous critical descriptions of the Wilder cinema, thus to provide a context within which the accuracy of my own remarks may be judged.

The traditional view of Wilder, which for brevity's sake I will only summarize, sees him as the quintessential Viennese *film noir* cynic. This view dates back to Herbert Luft's 1952 attack on Wilder in the pages of *The Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television*; but Luft's essentially anti-Hollywood argument, and the descriptive and evaluative distortions which attend upon that argument, was elevated to orthodoxy in the early sixties with the help of John Simon, Charles Higham, and Andrew Sarris.<sup>1</sup> All things considered, Sarris's *Film*

Culture attack on Wilder, which was eventually reprinted in *The American Cinema*, is the most tentative and least offensive of the lot. But unfortunately, it was also negative enough and influential enough to determine the vocabulary and parameters of debate on Wilder for the next several years.

In descriptive terms, the "Wilder-as-cynic" position focuses on the disjunction between Wilder's allegedly cynical and satiric sensibility and the frequently upbeat, Hollywood-comedy endings of the majority of his films. In evaluative terms, however, this apparent disjunction gives rise to two critical responses. Anti-Wilder critics take the contrast between sensibility and execution as evidence that Wilder is "too cynical to believe even his own cynicism" (Sarris, p. 166). Wilder is therefore both a misanthrope and a hypocrite; a misanthrope for reviling the sordidness of life, and a hypocrite for sugar coating the misanthropy of his films with superficially happy but ultimately false endings. Pro-Wilder critics, most notably Joseph

McBride, Michael Wilmington, and Stephen Farber, interpret the same evidence differently.<sup>2</sup> That is, they by and large agree that the disjunction exists — but they don't attribute the ambiguity to box-office calculation. They rather take it as evidence of a genuine and ultimately skeptical ambivalence at the heart of Wilder's moral and ethical vision. Thus Wilder may want to believe his own endings — but he doesn't, and accordingly they don't come off.

We may define the descriptive and critical short-comings of this Wilder-as-cynic position as follows. First, there is the general tendency to substitute the part for the whole, hence denying, at least by implication, the integrity of the Wilder canon. Thus for Stephen Farber, by far the best and least self-righteous critic of this group, Wilder is defined as a filmmaker of ending-less, three-quarter length films. Other critics, most notably John Simon and Charles Higham, are far less generous. For them, Wilder, the "real" Wilder, is defined, almost completely, in terms of the four *film*



noir masterworks made between 1944 and 1951, i.e., *Double Indemnity*, *The Lost Weekend*, *Sunset Boulevard*, and *Ace in the Hole*. Even McBride and Wilmington spend most of their *Film Quarterly* overview of Wilder discussing *Ace in the Hole*, which they see as his most typical film; and their lengthy section on *Some Like It Hot* discusses it almost entirely in film noir terms. Secondly, and as a consequence, the Wilder-as-cynic position effectively collapses generic distinctions between Wilder's films noir and his comedies. The comedies simply become films noir with false endings. But even allowing the likelihood that some would wish to consider films like *Stalag 17*, *Witness for the Prosecution*, and *The Front Page* as films noir, it still remains true that the primary Wilder genre, both early, before he began directing his Hollywood scripts, and late, is comedy. To refuse to consider the comicalness of Billy Wilder, on the unstated principle that happy endings are of necessity false endings, is to refuse Wilder altogether.

The release of *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* in 1970 caught most of Wilder's critics off-guard. It generated little critical comment, positive or negative, for fitting so poorly into the Wilder-as-cynic paradigm which largely dominated the field. By the time *Avanti!* was released two years later, however, a new orthodoxy was taking form. No less than five major articles appeared on the heels of *Avanti!*, all of which undertook to rethink Wilder in terms of his last two films.<sup>3</sup>

There are several things to be briefly remarked upon in connection with these articles. First of all there is the matter of authorship. One of the key factors in the apparent ascendancy of this new position is the fact that its chief proponents had previously been on the other side of the critical fence. Thus Joseph McBride and Stephen Farber both took the opportunity provided by *Avanti!* to recast their descriptions of Wilder. And even Andrew Sarris, some three years later, followed suit.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, all of the articles, Sarris's included, are remarkably unanimous in describing Wilder as a "closet romanticist." There has always been "a tentative romantic streak hidden behind Wilder's notoriously cynical facade," wrote Stephen Farber in the Summer 1973 issue of *Film Quarterly*, "but in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* and *Avanti!*, Wilder...allow(s) that side of his personality fuller expression than ever before" (p. 49).

This Wilder-as-romantic notion has much to recommend it. To begin with, considering Wilder as a romantic almost automatically requires that we take the whole of Wilder seriously. To invoke the paradigm of the romantic artist is to put the question of individual expression or personal vision uppermost in our list of critical priorities. Thus it doesn't matter

which values Wilder attacks or celebrates as long as we describe them accurately. Secondly, the word "romantic" is broad enough and its connotations to account for and thus to emphasize two very strong and insufficiently noticed components of the Wilder cinema: 1) his focus on the positive aspects or possibilities of human sexuality (his films almost always center on couples and in most cases love wins out over less humane values); and 2) the general and

that his films are then "romances." On the other hand, however, some of his films are indeed "romances," in the literary and formal sense of that word, and to recognize that fact is a necessary step towards understanding Billy Wilder.

Another necessary distinction, related to the first, involves the dichotomy between the motivation of characters and the outcome of their actions. In terms of motivation we can say that the "primal event" in



Frandor Tone and Erich von Stroheim in *Five Graves to Cairo*.

value-charged sense of nostalgia which can be traced as far back as *Ninotchka*, *Ball of Fire*, and even *Five Graves to Cairo* (I think here of the final graveyard sequence). To acknowledge either of these characteristics is to deny the Wilder-as-cynic position, and the two taken together cast a new light even on such films noir as *Double Indemnity*, *The Lost Weekend*, and *Sunset Boulevard*.

My own work on Billy Wilder can be well enough understood as a complement to, and an extension of, the Wilder-as-romantic position. Much that I have to say in my forthcoming monograph on Billy Wilder fits comfortably under this rubric and I frequently use the term "romantic" precisely as McBride and Farber and Sarris use it. If my remaining remarks seem to take issue with this picture, then, it is only because I now think it incomplete. Besides which, most of the Wilder-as-romantic critics are well worth reading (unlike Simon) and I can rely on them to argue their own case well enough.

My quarrel with the Wilder-as-romantic critics involves their failure to make what I take to be a crucial distinction, that between sensibility and genre. Thus I would agree that Wilder is in his heart of hearts a romantic, but it does not necessarily follow

almost every Wilder film is the heroic assertion of self over circumstance. Such assertions are typical of the protagonists of romances, who successfully and repeatedly demonstrate a degree of superiority over both their fellow human beings and their environment.<sup>5</sup> The chivalric triumph of knight over dragon is a convenient paradigm of this romantic narrative structure.

Disregarding for the moment the matter of chronology, we can arrange Wilder's chief protagonists on a continuum of motives and actions ranging from the heroic to the demonic. Pure heroism, untainted by improperly ulterior motives, is relatively rare in Wilder, though we can see it clearly enough in Lindbergh's trans-Atlantic quest in *The Spirit of St. Louis*. Another sort of Wilder protagonist, who manages to align an heroic sort of self-service with a genuine if distanced regard for others, is the more benign version of the Wilder capitalist. The archetype here is Linus Larrabee (Humphrey Bogart) in *Sabrina*. His dissertation on the social benefits which will follow from the construction of a new plastics plant has a genuinely visionary ring to it and indicates the basic integrity beneath Larrabee's businessman's facade. At least as I read the





Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine in *Irma La Douce*.

film, it is this very same integrity which Sabrina intuitively finds attractive, and Larrabee's eventual decision to follow her to Europe confirms the basic accuracy of Sabrina's intuition. Other such capitalist visionaries include the Count Leon d'Algot in *Ninotchka*, Virgil Smith in *The Emperor Waltz*, Frank Flannagan in *Love in the Afternoon*, and C.R. MacNamarra in *One, Two, Three*.

The relationship between these first two varieties of Wilder hero is clarified by the Sefton (William Holden) character in *Stalag 17*. He had aspired to be a pilot, like Lindbergh; had become a sort of capitalist clown upon his imprisonment, making money for himself while at the same time providing his fellow prisoners with much needed and morale building diversions; and he eventually demonstrates true if cool-headed heroism by exposing Price as a collaborator and by taking Dunbar out of camp.<sup>6</sup>

By and large Wilder's capitalists are upper class. The lower class equivalent is the familiar Wilder con-artist. Here we have characters like Joe in *Some Like It Hot*, Moustache in *Irma La Douce*, Barney Millsap in *Kiss Me, Stupid*, Willie Gingrich in *The Fortune Cookie*, and Carlucci in *Avanti!* — all are men perfectly willing to take advantage of the weaknesses and insecurities of others, but their schemes are never motivated by genuine malice. In general, Wilder's con-artists are simply doing their best to survive in a world where survival is difficult. And the fact that they so often fail argues ultimately in their favor.

Wilder's sympathy for the underdog also clarifies for us the role that women generally play in his films. A few of them, Erika von Schlutow in *A Foreign Affair*, Lorraine Minosa in *Ace in the Hole*, Sandi Hinkle in *The Fortune Cookie*, are predatory, to be sure. But the vast majority of Wilder women are people of real

integrity and feeling who are forced to become sexual con-artists so as to survive in sexist societies which allow little scope for their energy or intelligence. One thinks back to Eve Peabody in *Midnight*, to Sugarpudd O'Shea in *Ball of Fire*, to Susan Applegate in *The Major and the Minor*, to Sugar Kane in *Some Like It Hot*, to Irma in *Irma La Douce*, to Polly the Pistol in *Kiss Me, Stupid*, even to Ilsa von Hoffmanstall in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*: every one is a woman to be admired for her resiliency and courage.

The demonic counterpart to Wilder's benign visionary capitalist is the equally visionary but far less beneficent Nazi. Nazis or the Nazi era are frequently seen or referred to in Wilder, in *Hold Back the Dawn*, *The Major and the Minor*, and *Witness for the Prosecution*; and Nazis play major roles in *Five Graves to Cairo*, *A Foreign Affair*, and *Stalag 17*. Like their capitalist brethren in Wilder, his Nazis are moved by the romantic impulse to recreate the world in their own image. Unlike Wilder's capitalists, however, their image of the world allows no room for other visions to exist. And it is this complete lack of flexibility and humanity which both earns and occasions their downfall. Thus Rommel (von Stroheim) literally outwits himself in *Five Graves to Cairo*: his supply cache scheme is so elaborate and well planned that it cannot help but come to light with only a little courageous assistance from an ex-insurance clerk and a French maid. Likewise, in *Stalag 17*, Col. von Scherbach goes too far in assuming that his informant cannot be detected — and both he and his plant pay for their hubris.

A specifically American manifestation of this sort of romanticism run amok is represented alternately by insurance companies, law enforcement agencies, and gangsters, with the gangsters being the worse of the three. Insurance companies come under attack in Wilder for their temerity in trying to "insure" anything. Nothing is perfectly certain or sure in Wilder and to deny risk is to deny life. Thus it's an insurance agent in *Double Indemnity* who commits murder, and it's the personnel manager of an insurance company in *The Apartment* who drives the Shirley MacLaine character to attempt suicide. A similar desire to insure success, involving a corollary denial of life, can be seen to motivate the Sheriff in *Ace in the Hole*, who collaborates with Chuck Tatum in the publicity stunt which eventually kills Leo Minosa; and the Sheriff in *The Front Page* likewise collaborates in a publicity stunt which threatens an innocent life: in each case the publicity is intended to guarantee re-election. Gangsters in Wilder also seek to eliminate risk, by eliminating witnesses or rivals — and the hoods in *Ball of Fire* and *Some Like It Hot* share a clear family resemblance with their insurance and law enforcement counterparts elsewhere in Wilder.



And then, of course, there are Wilder's free lance fascists, Wilder con men who cross the line which separates hustling from homicide. Even here, to be sure, Wilder betrays a certain grudging admiration for characters like Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*, Chuck Tatum in *Ace in the Hole*, and Leonard Vole in *Witness for the Prosecution*, all of whom evidence a certain grotesque intelligence in their attempts to outwit the law of man and the laws of nature. But Wilder never allows murder to prosper.

A final demonic protagonist is worth remarking upon, both for itself and for the fact that it brings this discussion of Wilder's characters and their motives full circle. Certain characters in Wilder do not require enemies or antagonists to do them in. They try to do it themselves — by suicide. In the case of *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis Dietrichson's suicide, her refusal to shoot Neff the second time, before he can shoot her, evidences a kind of last-ditch integrity, and it also serves to re-assert a roughcast sort of justice. Both of the central characters in *Sunset Boulevard* also choose (whether consciously or not) to end their lives when it becomes clear to them that life holds little hope for the realization of their dreams. Thus Norma goes mad; and Joe almost invites her to shoot him in the back. And there are many potential or attempted suicides in Wilder. Don Birnam comes close in *The Lost Weekend* as does Sabrina in her film. Fran Kubelik in *The Apartment* tries to kill herself, and Bud Baxter tells her afterward that he too had tried once to end his life. The thing to note, however, is that in every case suicide represents a final if demonic outburst of romantic integrity. Each of the characters has or once had a vision of life as it should be, in which personal wishes are asserted over and against the probabilities of existence; and



Wilder and Holden on the set of *Fedora*.

when the assertion comes up short these characters choose to exercise their final option rather than have no control at all. In most cases they do not have to do it. To fail at suicide in Wilder usually brings success in life. But if they choose to do so, and can pull it off without endangering others, Wilder respects them enough to let them go. Wilder cannot follow them into the next world — the film must end when the suicide dies or goes mad — but Joe Gillis's head-long pitch into Norma Desmond's swimming pool is very much like Lindbergh's attempt to fly the Atlantic ocean; neither is really certain where he will land, and who's to say that Lindbergh's arrival in Paris, where he is greeted by a berserk and uncontrollable mob, is in any way preferable to whatever fate awaits Joe

Gillis on the other side of the water?

Earlier I posited a distinction between motives and outcomes, and I went on to suggest that in the case of the former Wilder's characters are consistently "romantic." But to look at the films in terms of outcomes is to understand the ambivalence with which Wilder views this sort of romanticism. In a few films heroic assertions of the will are rewarded or pay off. Lindbergh makes it to Paris. Likewise, in films where Nazis are dominant, as in *Five Graves to Cairo* and *Stalag 17*, Wilder permits his con-men to become heroic warriors in the fight against fascism. Their romanticism is acceptable when set against the more malignant Nazi variety. I would even describe *The Lost Weekend*, *Sunset Boulevard*, and *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* as romances in the formal sense of the word, in that each implies a certain heroic triumph of art over time. But where the heroic impulse, on the part either of creator or creations, is not in some way moderated before the action ends, the outcome of the film, and this clearly affects any generic taxonomy, is likely to be more tragic than comic. This is the case, I believe, in *Double Indemnity* and *Ace in the Hole*, though in both instances the death of the protagonist is accompanied by an heroic self-acknowledgement of hubris or guilt. And *Witness for the Prosecution*, if seen as Leonard Vole's movie, is likewise a parable of romanticism outwitting itself; he boasts too loudly of having outwitted fate and pays with his life.

Generically speaking, then, I would say that Wilder's films fall into three groups. At one extreme we find Wilder's romances, wherein heroic protagonists manage to overcome tremendous odds. At the other extreme we find Wilder's tragedies. In these films Wilder effectively if movingly parodies his romances by demonstrating

Sig Ruman and William Holden in *Stalag 17*.







Robert Stephens, Genevieve Page, and Colin Blakely in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*.

how readily heroic assertions can become demonic negations. Walter Neff wants to "crook the house" in *Double Indemnity* — he wants to assume power over life and death — and that power is, or at least ought to be, beyond any one man's control. The vast majority of Wilder's films, however, fall between the extremes of romance and tragedy. The protagonists generally remain romantics of one sort or another, caught up in a vision either of conquest, security, or ecstasy; but the typical movement of Wilder's films, a movement which defines the majority of them as comedies, involves the renunciation of perfection and the acceptance of temporality, insecurity, and sexuality. Thus in *The Major and the Minor* Susan Applegate abandons her quest for financial security in New York City and her reward for so doing is Major Philip Kirby. Likewise, in *The Lost Weekend* Don Birnum gives up his desire to be the next Hemingway. Being himself, and accepting Helen, provide him with all the inspiration he needs to write. Romanticism in *The Emperor Waltz* is defined as a rigidity in the social structure; and social status is finally rejected in favor of love. In *A Foreign Affair* it's the Jean Arthur character who seeks perfection, a celibate perfection on the part of American GIs, but she too accepts sexuality as a necessary component of human existence. In *Sabrina* both of the central characters are dreamers: Sabrina wants to marry David Larrabee and her desire threatens Linus's plans to go into the plastics business. But both of them give up dreaming to accept each other. We see similar renunciations of romanticism in favor of sexuality in *The Seven Year Itch*, *Love in the Afternoon*, *Some Like It Hot*, *The Apartment*, *One, Two, Three*, *Irma La Douce*, *Kiss Me, Stupid*, and *Avanti!* And the general import of the pattern is clear: to embrace sex, with its corollaries of death

and reproduction, is to embrace the imperfection of existence. And to embrace imperfection is to deny the terror which drives people like Don Birnum to drink.

If anything, it is Wilder's tendency to insist on this imperfection, thus to underline the fact that life is precious, tenuous, and never so probable or predictable as we might wish it to be. His lovers, for example, are frequently generations apart in age: Cooper and Hepburn in *Love in the Afternoon*, Bogart and Hepburn in *Sabrina*, Ewell and Monroe in *Seven Year Itch*, Holden and Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard*, Lemmon and Mills in *Avanti!* But this formula serves primarily to emphasize the urgency of the courtship process. One partner or the other is too old to let any more time go by. And even in films where the lovers are contemporary with one another Wilder still manages to invoke an element of time and danger. This is clearly the case in *Some Like It Hot*, where the gangsters are death personified, and the time element is also crucial in *The Apartment*: Fran has to dump Sheldrake and find Bud before Bud moves out of his flat and out of her life.

But to say that Wilder bears down on imperfection is not to call him a cynic. Just the contrary. The worst cynics in Wilder are those who seek the greatest certainty — like Chuck Tatum or Spats Columbo. Thus to label Wilder a cynic is the worst of all possible descriptions. To label Wilder a romantic is far better. At least it refutes the charge of cynicism and speaks to the emotional wellsprings of Wilder's vision and artistry, the constant Wilder conflict between romanticism and realism. But the description is false to the form which Wilder's artistry characteristically takes. All in all, Wilder is primarily a comedian. Thankfully, Wilder is still with us and still working. His later films, in fact, evidence a

trend away from comedy as Wilder's romanticism passes through the comic into the elegaic mode. Even *Avanti!*, the most overtly positive of Wilder's most recent films, features a severely attenuated comic conclusion. Wendell Armbruster, Jr. departs Italy to return to the U.S., accompanied by a counterfeit corpse, but he promises to return next year to Ischia so that he and Pamela can continue their relationship and thus pay homage to the love affair of their parents. But despite this recent turn towards melancholy on Wilder's part, his place in film history is secure. He ranks with Lubitsch, Capra, and Hawks as one of the great comic artists of the sound era. It is only right that we acknowledge his accomplishment.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Herbert G. Luft, "A Matter of Decadence," *The Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television*, 7, No. 1 (1952), pp. 58-66; John Simon, "Belts and Suspenders," *Theater Arts*, No. 46 (1962), pp. 20-24, rpt. in *Acid Test* (New York: Stein and Day, 1963); Charles Higham, "Cast a Cold Eye: The Films of Billy Wilder," *Sight and Sound*, 32, No. 2 (1963), pp. 83-87 ff., rpt. in *The Art of the American Film* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1973); Andrew Sarris, "Fallen Idols," *Film Culture*, No. 28 (1963), p. 30, rpt. in *The American Cinema* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968), pp. 166-167. For a more complete bibliography see Steve Seidman, *The Film Career of Billy Wilder* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1977).

<sup>2</sup>Joseph McBride and Michael Wilmington, "The Private Life of Billy Wilder," *Film Quarterly*, 23, No. 4 (1970), pp. 2-9; Stephen Farber, "The Films of Billy Wilder," *Film Comment*, 7, No. 4 (1971), pp. 8-22. See also Robert Munday, "Wilder Reappraised," *Cinema* (London), No. 4 (1969), pp. 14-19; and Michael Walker, "Review of Axel Madsen's *Billy Wilder*," *Screen*, 2 (1969), pp. 103-109.

<sup>3</sup>See particularly Jean-Loup Bourget, "La Dernier Carre," *Positif*, No. 149 (1973), pp. 1-13; Stephen Farber, "Two Old Men's Movies," *Film Quarterly*, 26, No. 4 (1973), pp. 49-52; Joseph McBride, "The Importance of Being Ernst" *Film Heritage*, 8, No. 4 (1973), pp. 1-9; Olivier Eyquem, "Le Rose et le Noir (Sur *Avanti!*)," *Positif*, No. 155 (1974), pp. 9-14; and James McCourt, "Billy Wilder," *Framework*, 11, No. 5 (1976), pp. 18-21.

<sup>4</sup>Andrew Sarris, "Billy Wilder: Closet Romanticist," *Film Comment*, 12, No. 4 (1976), pp. 7-9.

<sup>5</sup>On the topic of romance see Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 1957; rpt. New York: (Atheneum, 1969) and *The Secular Scripture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

<sup>6</sup>The *Stalag 17* section of my Wilder monograph was published as "The Politics of Perception: Wilder's *Stalag 17*," in *Film Criticism*, 1, No. 3 (1976), pp. 19-25.



# LETTER FROM AN UNKNOWN WOMAN



## The Dance of Time & Space

By Norman Hale

In 1948, the German-born emigré film director Max Ophüls, near the end of his Hollywood exile and just as the American film industry was beginning to experience hard times, spoke out concerning film style and its relation to the public. By simply providing the public with whatever it wanted, the film industry, he felt, had grown lazy: "Every picture got to look like some other previous picture...and the screen offered nothing new — no surprises, no stimulating change of subject or treatment." Consequently the public "moved on ahead and the old formulae aren't paying out."<sup>1</sup> He concluded with the optimistic

prediction that the financial crisis might ironically have a liberating effect on filmmaking by encouraging more idiosyncratic, visually stimulating works.

But the remarks are less revealing of the reasons for Hollywood's decline in the late 1940's than they are of Ophüls's brooding on his failure to capture wider critical acclaim in America. Since his arrival he had been assigned to second-rate projects, and no doubt his pride was wounded when he was assigned to observe Preston Sturges at work in order to sharpen his own technique. The only explanation that could reconcile his lack of success here with his tremendous success in Europe was to believe that his audience had been spoiled

for him, numbed to insensibility by a vast procession of emotionally empty, production-line films.

These remarks were prompted by the release, just prior to this, of his second American film *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. In accordance with his own prescription, *Letter* contains a tremendous density and variety of visual devices, more than we might expect perhaps from a director known almost exclusively as the master of one kind of shot...the track. The film is full of the kinds of "surprises" and "stimulating changes of subject" which he recommended. Yet, like *The Exile* before it, *Letter* failed to reach a wide audience.

While there may be some truth to the



charge that the Hollywood system discouraged stylistic innovation, to use this as an explanation for Ophuls's failure to reach a larger audience ignores the more fundamental cultural and social gulfs which separated him from the great mass of American moviegoers. His characters are a selection of types rarely found, and less rarely treated seriously, in American film: counts, duchesses, poets, dancers, soldiers, and artists. The world he depicts is a highly civilized, old-world society, restrictive in its nature owing to the accumulation of petrified social rituals. Its elegantly adorned surface — fine clothes, military uniforms, jewels, carriages — only barely disguises a fundamentally grim world in which human affairs are governed by completely impersonal, perhaps even vindictive, forces. In this world, love is granted one moment and withdrawn the next. Human life resembles a grand dance, graceful and stately, but moving in meaningless circles. Irrevocably, time confounds all plans and destroys all vanities.

It is the air of irony and fatalism that Ophuls's films breathe that Americans found discomfiting in 1948. Having restored order and morality to the world only three years earlier, they would not find stories of human limitation and cosmic victimization palatable or even credible. And the sense of human beings at the mercy of cosmic forces is nowhere more clearly expressed perhaps than in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*.

In this case the victim is Stefan Brand (Louis Jourdan) a concert pianist in turn-of-the-century Vienna, who is deprived by a perverse fate of the love he has waited for all his life. Brand returns late one evening to his apartment to prepare to flee from a duel to which he has been challenged. Before being dispatched to pack Brand's things, the manservant John gives him a letter that turns out to be the confession of a woman named Lisa Berndt (Joan Fontaine). The letter tells a complicated story of meeting Brand years earlier when she was only a fourteen-year-old girl, of becoming infatuated with him through his piano-playing, then meeting him as a young woman some years later, spending the night with him, and nine months after that, bearing his child. Brand meanwhile went on a concert tour and forgot her. Lisa's letter continues to relate how, after the birth of Brand's son, she married and enjoyed nine years of happiness with the respectable and wealthy Johann Stauffer.

In the course of Lisa's letter, the film narrative jumps back and forth from the past (the story told by Lisa) to the present (Brand reading the letter). Judging from the avidity with which he reads, it is clear that what the letter relates comes as a complete surprise. He has completely forgotten about Lisa, if he ever even noticed her at all. Her letter continues to tell how, after she thought she had recovered from her infatuation for Brand, she saw him again at

the opera and decided, despite her husband's threats, to meet him again. The meeting she arranged was a failure because Brand doesn't recognize her and treats her only as a sexual conquest. Lisa relates how she left in despair.

The last paragraph/episode of her letter reveals the cruelest news of all. Brand's nine-year-old son Stefan, whose existence he was ignorant of until the receipt of this letter, contracted typhus and died. Furthermore, a note attached to the letter reveals that Lisa also died from typhus soon after the letter was written. To Brand's despair, the "goddess" he has waited for so his life could "really begin" slipped in and out of his life so quietly he didn't even notice her presence.

The unusual past/present narrative structure of the film transmutes a simple tragedy of unfulfilled love into a much bleaker tale with overtones of maliciously prepared fate. As Brand reads the letter, Lisa's recollections of their wintry evening meeting, their supper, and their trip to the amusement park, appeal to him as a new, freshly-lived experience. He is not reliving his past life, but rather, because he has no memory of Lisa or the affair, he seems to be living his life truly for the first time. However, Lisa's opening words hang over the letter to remind us that the course of events has already been worked out: "By the time you read this letter I may be dead." Because we are given foreknowledge of Lisa's death, and because she is actually dead even before Brand receives the letter, we experience the feeling of being in a fatalistic, pre-determined universe. There is no way Brand can avert the tragic conclusion of the letter. That he has spent so long reading and that there is no time to flee from the duel is simply another irony to be added to a growing list.

The film is full of the irony of missed chances and crossed purposes. Characters only appear to be free, when, in fact, as the repeated motif of bars, gratings, and gates makes clear, the human condition most resembles a prison. Human desires are thwarted in a world of tragic limitations.

The mainspring of Ophulsian tragedy is time. There never seems to be enough of it (although one might argue that in living his life a second time by means of Lisa's letter, Brand suffers from *too much* time). Characters scurry in all directions, in all manner of vehicles, to all sorts of appointments dictated by a multitude of schedules. By train, by carriage, by foot, they pursue their hurried lives in the constant awareness of being pursued by time. It is this incessant flow of human activity, more than anything so obtrusive or specific as a literal clock, that measures time. Movement, as the visual symbol for the passing of time, flows through Ophuls's film like the grain in a piece of wood. Even the most seemingly inconsequential actions are rendered by the flow of the moving camera. One thinks most naturally of the persistent use of the



Stefan Brand and Lisa's first dinner.



Inside the "prater."



Outside Brand's flat.

tracking shot. Notable examples occur here when Lisa, as a fourteen-year-old, secretly explores Brand's apartment, or when, as a grown woman, she scans the faces of the patrons at the opera. Equally important are the crane shots (a kind of vertical track) the most notable example of which occurs when Lisa is followed up the spiral stairway, watching intently as the movers haul Brand's piano to the second floor.

While Ophuls's camera is almost always active (if not moving, then at least selecting a surprising perspective from which to photograph) there are important moments when the camera is still and neutral. One example of this neutrality occurs when Lt. Kaltnegger proposes to Lisa. The scene has been preceded by an extensive tracking shot of the couple as they cross the village square in Linz and as they sit on a secluded park bench. The proposal sequence itself is composed of traditional one and two-shots, moving from medium distance to close up.





Max Ophüls.

When Kaltnegger's proposal is refused (because Lisa is secretly in love with Brand), they rise, and the camera begins to track them again.

This sequence is a prelude to a longer one when Brand, actually becoming aware of Lisa for the first time, takes her to dinner. As they eat and talk in the restaurant, the camera cuts back and forth between them in one and two-shots. It never pans. After a brief carriage drive to the amusement park and a short walk around the grounds in the dead of winter, Lisa and Brand settle into a ride called the "prater," a stationary railway compartment complete with whistle, steam, and a painted landscape that rolls by the window. Lisa sits on the left, Brand on the right, facing her. Occasionally the camera cuts back and forth between them, but generally it merely photographs them in a medium two-shot while the travel scenes roll by the window. For the first time in the film, characters exchange more than a few words on the run. Instead of moving hurriedly through the world, they now sit still while the world — Venice, Switzerland, America — flows by outside. In one of the most important sequences of the film, the characters have entered a dimension where space and time have no meaning.

Much critical attention has been given to the brilliant tracking shots in Ophüls's films without a corresponding awareness of how these shots alternate with moments of spatial rest. The alternation of movement with rest, of a state of time with a state of no-time, is the pattern on which all of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* is built, and it is generally the paradigm of human experience in all of Ophüls's films. The moments

of greatest emotional intensity are represented as existing separate from other moments in a transcendent state beyond space and time. Life's richest moments are timeless. They are to the rest of life as mountain peaks are to valleys.

The rhythmic ebb-and-flow quality of the film created by movement (both of camera and characters) alternating with moments of stillness is Ophüls's affective metaphor for life's rhythms. That is, this is his way of simulating that particular emotional experience for the film viewer. However, he also employs other images which are not so much attempts to re-create those life-rhythms as to stand as symbols of them. In other films more specifically than this, the image of the waltz with its rhythmic movement/pause structure is used to suggest the flowing quality of time and the passing of human lives. But the waltz image is chosen for other qualities inherent in it as well. The waltz is stylized, self-contained, repetitive movement. It is an infinite series of circular motions with no beginning and no end. In the movements of the waltz are summarized the major stylistic and philosophical themes of all Ophüls's work: the sheer breathlessness of life punctuated infrequently with meaningful pauses, and the circularity of human lives.

The structure of the film itself provides the most obvious examples of repetition. By the device of Lisa's letter, Brand is enabled (forced?) to repeat his life. Lisa's whole life has been a repetition of the pattern of returning to Brand's and climbing the stairs to his apartment. She does this four times: as a fourteen-year-old girl; as a young woman in order to confess her love to Brand only to observe him from the

darkened hallway escorting another woman; on the evening of the prater ride when they make love; and a final time ten years later when Brand fails to remember her. Brand's apartment exerts a centripetal force on Lisa, drawing her in. Her insistence on repeating these actions has led critic Michael Kerbel to declare that Lisa is fixated at an immature emotional level. She "does not function in the real world; she can live only in a self-enclosed world of nostalgia and illusion."<sup>2</sup> By continuing to return to Brand's apartment, she has failed to "progress" in her emotional growth.

Before we examine these charges of neurosis, we should look at two other important examples of repetition. The first occurs when Lisa, on her second trip to Brand's apartment in order to surrender herself to him and to prevent being taken to Linz with her mother, falls asleep at the door to his apartment. She is awakened by the sound of his return in the hallway below. As he enters the building with a woman on his arm, Lisa climbs up another flight of stairs and peers over the railing. The camera reproduces her point of view as she looks down on them entering the apartment. She accepts the inevitable and moves to Linz. On her third trip to Brand's apartment — the night of the prater ride and the night they make love — her triumphal entry is photographed in exactly the same way from exactly the same high angle in the stairwell. The representations are identical except that Lisa has replaced the other woman.

Another important repetition occurs in scenes at the railway station. When Brand leaves on his concert tour, he and Lisa part at the station, in a scene marked visually by the forbidding iron spikes of the gates and fencing. Lisa's voice-over narration concludes: "That train was taking you out of my life." Ten years later she finds herself saying goodbye again to another Stefan, her son (a repetition of his father even down to his inherited musical talent) who is also being taken out of her life forever. Once again, the scene emphasizes the spikes and bars of the fence.

Kerbel's charge that Lisa is a neurotic compulsive implies that she is to blame for what happens. Were she psychologically healthier, none of this would have occurred — she would not have pursued Brand so single-mindedly, would not have had his child, would not have tried to re-kindle their affair. Presumably, breaking this habit of repetition would have broken the chain of events which culminates in the tragic death of her son and herself. But if the act of repetition is to be seen as compulsion, then Brand's frenetic seduction of women qualifies him as neurotic as well. The evening Lisa meets Brand after their ten year separation, he suggests a little dinner and sends John out to pick up "the usual things." In this single telling phrase is revealed the threadbare routine Brand's life has become.





The scenes of Lisa on the stairway and at the railway station illustrate a point quite other than neurosis. When we see Lisa and Brand climb the stairway from our viewpoint on the floor above, we are seeing an image of a world oblivious to human beliefs in individuality and importance. To the omniscient eye in the stairwell, Lisa is interchangeable with the women who have preceded her. The world is filled with "so many passersby" Lisa realizes near the end of her life, and "so many faces, that one might easily have been lost." The world-machine is careless of the individual. The scenes at the railway station reveal an even darker view of human experience in which fate criss-crosses events in hidden ways that ensnare the healthy and neurotic alike. The individual is hostage to events contrived by a mysterious agent of fate. No one is to blame.

The view that time and human lives are circular, repetitive movements, has some disturbing implications. The idea of valuable human goals is a mirage. The notion of progress is a delusion. This point is emphasized during the scene in the prater when the panorama of Switzerland passes the window.

Lisa: What mountain is that?

Brand: (looking) That's the Matterhorn.

Lisa: Have you climbed it?

Brand: Yes.

Lisa: Tell me, when you climb a mountain, what then?

Brand: Why, you come down again.

Goals, once achieved, are meaningless. To stand atop the Matterhorn is, as when achieving any other goal, only to pause a moment in the waltz. Kerbel remarks that "the idea, and the image, of ascension and descent really sum up the entire film." This is true enough only if we are careful not to equate ascent with progress. All movements, whether vertical or horizontal, are equal. Going up is the same as coming down. Descending a mountain is equivalent to descending a staircase or taking a turn on the dance floor. Life is process not progress.

What prevents *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and other Ophüls films from becoming deadened accounts of victims dancing to the bewitching tunes of a malicious cosmic fiddler are a sense of wit, humor, and style. And, undeniably, the films have a lush and sensitive beauty. But is there more?

Despite the sense of futility and emptiness which characterizes the Ophüls world, there is one important value which stands out. In a world where time swallows everything, one human faculty endures to extract meaning from an otherwise meaningless world. This trait is memory, and it is the formal basis for the construction of the film. Lisa's memories as expressed in her letter give meaningful shape to experiences that would otherwise have been lost. To be able to remember is to escape the tyranny of time, an idea that Ophüls shares notably with Marcel Proust. Lisa's memories allow her to die without regret, assuring Brand "that I love you now

as I always loved you. Our love can be measured by the moments I had with you and our child. If only you could have shared those moments, if only you could have recognized what was always yours."

Brand, on the other hand, has no clear memories, only vague intimations. Brand is constantly ransacking an imperfect memory to bring Lisa's face into focus. When he and Lisa dance, he is surprised at the rapid intimacy which grows up between them: "How else could we dance this way, unless we danced together before. And yet, if we had, I should have remembered." Ten years later at the opera his faulty memory fails him again: "I've seen you somewhere, I know. I followed you upstairs and watched you...but I couldn't place you." He asks her if she has ever "shuffled faces like cards, hoping to find the one that lies somewhere just over the edge of your memory?" But shuffle as he will, Brand cannot remember her, and he can never hope to share the joy she has as a result of her memories. Brand's failure to remember suggests a moral carelessness on his part, for even his manservant John remembers her from when she was a young girl. While Lisa at least has her memories, Brand is by far the more tragic figure, living on the edge of awareness without art, memories, or love.

Recognizing that life no longer holds anything for him after he has finished Lisa's letter, and caught without enough time to escape from the duel, Brand accepts his fate. As he descends the stairs, exits the courtyard, and looks back for the last time, Lisa has her moment of triumph. For a moment we see a vision of her as an adolescent holding the door open for him the first time he ever saw her. In this moment of spontaneous memory, Lisa has become more than just another woman in a long list of careless affairs. She becomes the woman Brand remembers before his death. That he is capable of this act of memory affords both a poignant and tragic close to the film. Her image fades. After this brief and still moment, Brand again enters the circle of time as the wheels of the carriage turn to deliver him to his death.

*Letter from an Unknown Woman* ultimately derives from a much older, wiser world than America of the forties. It was a world made cynical by violent social disruptions and political instability that dissolved the underpinnings of supposedly stable societies overnight. It was a world suffused with pessimism and despair. It is no wonder Max Ophüls didn't reach his greater audience.

#### Notes

1. William Weaver, "Public Apathy Provides Initiative for Creative Effort, Ophüls Believes, *Motion Picture Herald*, November 6, 1948.
2. Michael Kerbel, "Letter from an Unknown Woman," *Film Comment*, 7, 2 (Summer 1971), p. 61.





# CITY GIRL

## MURNAU'S

### ART of the SILENT IMAGE

By Thomas Hyde

Somewhere in the annals of film history there is a solemn note concerning F.W. Murnau, that he is to be known for directing four great silent classics — *Nosferatu*, *The Last Laugh*, *Sunrise*, *Tabu* — in a career otherwise plagued with disaster. The record is full of missing entries: 9 of his 17 German films are lost, including most of his early work; of the films made in Hollywood and shown to any public only *Sunrise* survives. *Faust*, *Tartuffe* — these films seem not to be popular, at least not with English-speaking critics. Mountains then, and holes: the career of F.W. Murnau.

Annals apart, such a filmography certainly discourages saying anything definite about a filmmaker's canon. And Murnau critics have, more often than not, tended to argue the merits of their choice of supreme

masterpiece rather than deal with the admittedly more problematic issue of the continuity and development among adjacent works. This "masterpiece" mentality may be partly to blame for the precious little attention paid to Murnau's silent version of *City Girl*, discovered in the vaults of Fox studios in 1970. This film and *Four Devils*, which preceded it, had been lost for years, and around them the legend grew up of Murnau's downfall at the hands of the Hollywood money moguls. Murnau and Hollywood were incompatible, or so the story goes; he was fiercely intransigent about artistic matters and held in disdain the executives' economic and commercial concerns. The upshot was that after *Sunrise* he had to yield against his will

to the tastes of others and the trend toward sound. The studio did, in fact, interfere with both *Four Devils* and *City Girl*; new endings with sound dialogue had to be added to them before the studios would release them theatrically.

One would think that even without the reference points of these other two films this original 1929 *City Girl* would shed some light on Murnau's development between *Sunrise* and *Tabu*, and on his artistic methods and career in general. However, the question has been raised whether this version too was not also altered drastically by the studio, during its shooting and in its editing. It does seem, on the face of it, a quite diminished realization of the *Our Daily Bread* Murnau envisioned in a 1928 letter to William Fox,





Kate ponders her objective correlative.

reported by Lotte Eisner in her English edition of *Murnau*.<sup>1</sup> Murnau originally conceived of the film as a "Durer wood-engraving," says Eisner, which was to be "a tale about wheat, about the sacredness of bread, about the estrangement of the modern city dwellers and their ignorance about Nature's sources of sustenance..." (quoting from the letter). In addition to the harvesting sequences in the film as we now have it, Murnau apparently wanted to include a sort of documentary sequence on the production of bread, and for the city scenes, shoot on location in Chicago in order to dramatically underline "the oppressiveness of the city with the peace and quiet of the plains" (Eisner).

Having been given *carte blanche* by Fox for *Sunrise*, Murnau, it is well known, went so far as to construct, right on the studio grounds, a country village, an expanse of swamp, and large slices of city into which he could move his characters and his camera. It may seem anomalous then, even granting the tighter budget, that so little of those opposing worlds Murnau spoke so enthusiastically of filming for *Our Daily Bread* is physically visible in *City Girl*. Missing here are the huge sets of *Sunrise* and their establishing shots, so that the city scenes, nearly all being extremely enclosed studio interiors, give no larger impression of what the city actually looks like. Not only is there no documentary on bread, but considering that Murnau bought a whole farm near Pendleton, Oregon on which to shoot his saga of wheat, the vast fields available to him, full of "Nature's sacred source of sustenance," receive precious little visual attention on the whole, being limited to two short scenes. Between the letter and the film, then, there seems to be more than enough room for disappointment; the contrast seems almost perverse.

Another curious difference from *Sunrise* is *City Girl*'s faster pace. A very different editing rhythm is employed here from the long-take style of the previous film, where Murnau seemed bent on minutely recording

the passage of psychological and emotional states. The first half of *City Girl* subjects us to intermittent intercutting between shorter scenes taking place in city and country. And the film's second half, characterized by its mounting melodrama and a rapid editing pace to match, increasing in tempo as it nears the climax of the father's conversion, strikes many people as pitched more to providing the expected clichés of a Hollywood ending, with all their attendant emotional effects, than toward dealing seriously with the psychological and emotional issues raised. Indeed, Lotte Eisner thought she detected a hand other than Murnau's own in the story and in the editing, in scenes she thought cut and others cut out, perhaps, she surmised, in an effort to adapt the film to the faster pace of the talkies to which audiences were now becoming accustomed.

However, from the very beginning of *City Girl*, Murnau seems to be deliberately calling our attention to its divergence from *Sunrise* (in his last film to have been seen by any sizable audience). *City Girl* opens by invoking the archetype which generated the central dramatic conflict of *Sunrise* — the simple country man seduced by a Woman from the City — and then promptly rejects it, dismissing it as any concern of *this* film. As if to dispel any impression that *Sunrise* was affirming the inherent superiority of country over city, Murnau makes of his *City Girl* one of his most personable and sympathetic heroines, and eventually concentrates on the destruction of her romantic, wish-fulfillment illusions about country life. Kate, the city girl, travels to the country where her entrance into the life of the Tustine family precipitates a crisis. But while Kate adds to the crisis, it is not she who disrupts; rather, the problem is the web of assumptions about her motives, character and influence, derived from social stereotypes, in which she finds herself hopelessly entangled. The crowning reversal from *Sunrise* is that Kate becomes the prey of a macho male "vamp" from the country (played with smoldering virility by



(1), (2) First impressions. "Can you beat it? He's praying!"; (3) "Betcha two bits he's gonna take a chance on the hash." (4) The person behind the stereotype. "Kinda lonesome in the big city, ain't it? What're you doing here?"

Guinn Williams).

Murnau deployed the popular myth of the vamp in *Sunrise* because it provided him with a means of illuminating some deeper experiential truths. *City Girl* focuses on the inverse of this notion: the error of accepting conventional images as an index of reality, the destructive assumptions behind them. Moreover, *City Girl* explores the process of social conditioning by which





(5) "Pa's Scotch, Ma's Canadian, and I'm plain American."

these attitudes and values are perpetuated and the effects that they have on the formation of character and identity. *City Girl* can be seen as Murnau's meditation on the volatile power of such value-laden images; how, by assimilating them unawares, they can rule the course of even our most intimate relations.

Correspondingly, *City Girl* is a more direct critique of American social reality than was *Sunrise*, reflecting a deeper awareness on Murnau's part of its cultural assumptions. In addition to singling out the Protestant family, Murnau, in an oblique way, brings his European point of view to bear on the notion of America as the land of



Lem sends a lecher packing.

opportunity, and the cherished American myth of self-determination.

The first (post-credit) image is of a train rushing across the midwestern plains, tracing the familiar Murnau curve of motion into the depth of the image and rightward across it, propelling us, *in media res*, into *City Girl*. Inside the train, we are introduced to callow, young Lem Tustine in a short vignette whose masterful economy of expression characterizes the whole of Murnau's handling of the narrative. In our first view of Lem we see him search frantically for his ticket in response to the demand of the seemingly disembodied hand of the conductor, intruding from outside the frame into Lem's personal space. Already we are not only informed of Lem's boyish inexperience (the trait around which the wry suspense of this whole sequence is built), but also of his fear in the face of authority. The lack of self-assurance exhibited by Lem here will soon find the first part of its cure in the process of overcoming the obstacles to his courtship of Kate. But Lem's problem has, as we shall see, deeper

and darker roots in a debilitating parental influence which is not so easily overcome and which Lem must confront. The last half of *City Girl* is structured around the rift that develops between Lem and Kate over this issue, and the peculiar process, adumbrated by Murnau, by which Lem manages to come to terms with the private bogeymen that haunt this phase of his journey into worldly experience and maturity.

As this sequence continues our attention is drawn to the apparently more benign and humorous aspects of this parent-child relationship. Lem reads a letter from his Pa, a series of stern admonitions stressing the imperative of Lem's getting the right price for the farm's wheat crop which he is to sell in the city. Pa's cautions, however, have an effect contrary to their intention. Reading "Don't lose your money," Lem pulls out his wallet and conscientiously but conspicuously begins counting the bills, sparking the interest of the city vamp seated across the aisle. Pressing her seductive charms into service, she flirtily inquires about "luncheon." But her wiles are lost on Lem, who, fortuitously, has just found the note Ma has packed in his lunch, reminding him among other things that he's not to take up with strangers. Disgusted at his obtuse response, the woman gives up. Lem munches his sandwich, oblivious to the miniature crisis raised and resolved through his obedience to his absent parents. But Lem's ignorance of the iconography of city evil counts here too. He is an innocent, and despite the anxious concern of his parents, his innocence will see him through the less obtrusive evils that await him in the city.

The film now cuts away from Lem's journey to offer us a glimpse of the forces building before and behind, portents of this altogether different fate lying in store for him. The comparable journey in Murnau's work this sequence calls to mind is that of the trolleycar ride in *Sunrise*. But where the impression of that journey is of one long unbroken movement, here Murnau takes a detour of sorts, interrupting Lem's progress to the city with a series of intercut short scenes which, alternating between farm and city, develop a poetic complex of comparisons between the two environments and the people associated with them. This contrast in the treatment of the two journeys may at first seem an important distinction, but its significance fades as the realization dawns that Murnau is really just using different routes to get to the same place: what *Sunrise* expresses largely within the shot, *City Girl* accomplishes via montage. For what we have isolated (somewhat artificially) here, are two different stylistic manifestations of the same expressive principle, namely the phenomenon of setting things into relief, implied in the idea of the "woodcut."

In the *Sunrise* sequence, the question of the outcome of the conflict between husband and wife is interrupted as the

exhilarating movement of the world outside also registers itself on our awareness, and for a few breathless, silent moments the two opposing emotional pulls are suspended side by side, each one poignantly intensifying the presence of the other. The corresponding sequence in *City Girl*, which for me represents the height of expressive editing in Murnau's art, transforms *Sunrise's* emphasis on the movement of the camera and the characters through space into a concern with a "horizontal" flow of images in time, which take the form of a dialectical juxtaposing of city and country.

But the succeeding "scenes" in this alternating montage nevertheless flow back one upon the other, setting off, with reverberating clangs of irony, the city and Pa Tustine's ignorance of conditions there with the country and Kate's romantic illusions about it. "I like the reality of things," wrote Murnau, "but not without fantasy; they must dovetail. Is that not so with life, with human reactions and emotions?" What Murnau is illuminating here, by stressing the interstices between the characters' assumptions and the world's harsh realities, are those murky operations of the mind which intervene in lieu of knowledge and experience. One might say the ambition here is, paradoxically, to film the ineffable.

The first part of this intercut sequence establishes Pa's near-pathological regard for the wheat and, by contrast, the indifference with which the wheat is treated in the city. Back on the farm Pa worries out loud to Ma about the advisability of sending Lem on his own to Chicago and then anxiously he works the figures for the grain sale. As Pa emphatically draws the sum line in his calculations, anticipating the reassuring final figure, Murnau dissolves and the camera (as if taking its momentum from Tustine's certitude) carries on the rightward movement of his hand, tracking across the "Board of Trade" sign in the city. Here a new influence on the wheat is revealed, mocking Pa's narrow assumptions. In the few brief shots of the Board of Trade (anticipating the elaborate stock exchange sequence in Antonioni's *Eclipse* by 40 years) a clerk, taking imperceptible cues from the violent gesticulations of a rapacious mob of brokers, records on a blackboard a series of prices for the wheat that have already fallen below that expected by Tustine. Here the wheat, imbued with a nearly sacred value by Pa, is just another abstract commodity, its value subject to the unpredictable fluctuations of the market place. All Pa's worry over Lem and the figures is for naught; the fate of the wheat will be determined by forces beyond the control of either father or son.

A cut back to the farm reveals a further consequence of Pa's anxiety and suggests something about its social context. Pa's calculations are interrupted when he spots Marie, the younger daughter, braiding some stalks of the grain together. Rushing outside, he gruffly snatches them from her,



growling, "I raise wheat to sell, not to play with! Every grain counts!" She cowers in fear and bewilderment but this goes unnoticed by Pa, who is absorbed in tenderly straightening the bent stalks. Inside the farmhouse, he reverently places them in the family Bible for safe-keeping. What follows is an allusion to the classic family tableau: the ritual of sharing a meal around the dinner table — except that here the scene is a distortion of it: Ma meekly sets the table, the old man presiding sternly at its head; Marie creeps fearfully into her place. In close-up, a sullen Pa recites the Lord's Prayer ("...give us this day our daily bread..." reads the title), clutches the loaf of bread to himself in preparation for doing it out, and begins to cut a slice...

With a few sure strokes, Murnau has rendered a complex, psychological portrait of a repressive tyrant, complete with mitigating social factors. Pa's ministrations to the wheat, his cherishing of it, his insecurities about it, betray a deeper, underlying fantasy of his own authority and power, his relative importance in a scheme of things whose distorted character is to be seen as a function of the mores and beliefs of his rural Protestant milieu. Adhering to the ideals of a puritanical, repressive religion, Pa has grown into the role of the Father in a terrible, perverse way, his better instincts steered astray into a preoccupation with power and control. By acting in the name of a higher moral authority — following so undeviatingly the imperatives of Duty and Reverence, enforcing them in himself and in his family like a good father should — Pa has also taken on its aura of omnipotence and righteousness. Pa's excesses, like the readings of the barometer which is hung so conspicuously on the farmhouse wall, are a register of the invisible pressures bearing on him from without. Pa is a pitiful, truncated figure in reality, and that he himself senses the inherent weakness of the stance he has delivered himself into is shown in the way his anxiety about the wheat and Lem is transformed into fury at Marie, a fury which we now suspect will be unleashed in spades at any further threats to his domain and authority.

This disquieting image of Pa slicing the bread is displaced by its incongruous city counterpart, as Murnau dissolves again to a close-up of pieces of bread moving down the conveyor belt of a slicing machine. The camera dollies back to introduce Kate, in medium shot, holding the plate onto which the slices are falling. The camera reframes to a new position to take in long shot the steaming, crowded restaurant into which she recedes, as she moves away from us down a narrow passage flanked on one side by a counter bristling with male customers. The linking here of Pa in the country with Kate in the city through the bread is not just a clever conceit. The distinctive characters of two different social milieus proliferate out from, and are set into relief by, the

opposing attitudes implicit in the treatment of the wheat, as its source and as its destination. The over-regard of the country is again set against its opposite extreme, manifesting itself here in the city dwellers' indifference to the source of their physical sustenance. The consequences, however, of these differing orientations are the same: a disregard for the spiritual sustenance for which human nature also has its needs, an issue which now becomes embodied in the fate of Lem and Kate, symbolized in the passing of the wheat to Kate in the form of bread and then to Lem as bread pudding.

What is striking about the sequence which follows, involving the meeting of Lem and Kate and their ensuing romance, is that Murnau pictures its course as being heavily determined by forces operating beyond their awareness or control. In this picture of things we may perceive the influence of the German concepts of the *Unwelt* and of *Destiny*, both of which are said to characterize many of the works of the classic German cinema of the 20's. The latter concept is clearly present in the many more-than-coincidental interventions affecting characters and events — the fortune ticket, for instance, which appears at just the right moment to nudge the lovers back toward one another after their imminent separation, or the storm of the second half. While the plot function served by these interventions is obvious, their implications for the characters, however, are a good deal more equivocal as we shall see.

The rendering of the *Unwelt* in *City Girl* is also a matter of some subtlety. The idea of *Unwelt* has to do with the perception of the world existing, not as a discrete entity out there separate from oneself, but as something more immaterially pervasive, being inside oneself as well as outside. In *The Cabinet Of Dr. Caligari*, for instance, this notion is expressed by means of distortion, in the abstract decor, the crazily painted cardboard sets — the world as seen in the mind of a lunatic. *City Girl* reflects this same notion but realizes it in a different manner than *Caligari*. Murnau is not interested here in characterizing the worlds of country and city by their observable physical appearance; instead, just enough is shown to register memorably the particular qualities he wants to single out. Murnau's strategy here, at least in this city sequence, is to suggest the force and feel of the social ambience by recording its effects on the characters who, isolated within the frame, nevertheless by their actions and behavior imply the influential presence of that world just outside the frame. Thus, the curious fact that Murnau allows very little of that outer world to be directly observed is the result of a systematic, aesthetic presentation, based on a variation of the principle of metonymy, the part standing for the whole.

Our understanding of Kate here and her situation is developed through just such a treatment. While it is the felt quality of Kate's experiencing that is being fore-



(1) Lem's POV: looking for Kate, who is looking for him. (2) Lem's proposal. (3) Kate's reaction. (4) Together with Kate.

grounded here, especially the sense of her deprivation and wish-fulfillment/longing, it clearly arises out of the despair and spiritual impoverishment inflicted upon her by her oppressive urban milieu, a world that lurks just beyond the edges of the frame, and of her awareness. It is a world of dehumanizing impersonal flux, of an implacable press of people and things each going their own way. Indeed, Kate's living conditions, her working conditions, the callous and





(1) Happiness... (2) ...then troubled awareness... (3) ...of what he has forgotten.

lustful men who line the restaurant counter, all seem to conspire to squelch her spirit and to eclipse her personal reality and desires.

After having distributed the bread, she attempts to take a breather behind a partition which separates her from the heat and teeming activity of the restaurant outside. Her attention is drawn to a calendar picture, a bucolic scene of sheep grazing in an open pasture. Apparently this serves as an inspiration to get a cooling breath of fresh air from the fan; not only does the fan "bite" her as she turns it toward herself, but she is immediately accosted by the manager, accused of shirking, and told that the fan is for the flies, not her. Later, in her flat, her rapt absorption by a billboard depiction of a couple's moonlit canoe ride on Lake Minnetonka is interrupted in much the same way, as a train flashes violently by right next to her window, brutally cutting off her view of the romantic image.

Not only, then, do Kate's alienating urban surroundings squelch her, they create the conditions for her longing, and generate the requisite image of which that desire can feed. While it is perfectly understandable

that Kate would naturally incline toward the opposite of what the city represents, she clearly is also in error to do so, for she is simply yielding to another of its pressures. As if in answer to the yearning expressed in her scrutiny of the calendar drawing, Lem arrives like a Destiny at Kate's doorstep, his saying grace in the first shot of him here, just like Pa back on the farm, reminding us of the ominous baggage of his parents he also carries with him.

Considering the extent of Kate's ignorance of her social conditioning, it is not so surprising that the same circumstances that cause her to be pinned away in the city will also mediate the course of her interest in Lem, despite what seems to be the obstacle of her defensive, city-cynical attitude. We share from Kate's point of view her first sight of Lem as he prays there at the counter, but our response to this coincidence of viewpoint is mixed, since we are only made aware of it by the subsequent reaction shot which subtly qualifies the sharing of sympathy implied: Kate and her co-worker gawk incredulously at Lem from their secret vantage point, and comment on his unfamiliar behavior. Her winning the bet that he will order the hash allows her to file him safely away as the Country Hick she spotted him for. As with the vamp on the train, Lem is bewildered by this, but it is this very transparency of his, the simple, humble virtues instilled in him at home (not to mention the convenient opening in the counter next to him) that cause Kate now to gravitate toward him as a kind of unthreatening sanctuary from the predictably cold or lascivious male customers she must deal with down at the other end of the counter. As they gradually warm to each other in this scene, Murnau establishes their natural affinity with an unerring touch. Their private moment is rudely broken by the press of the restaurant as Lem is crowded out of his seat by a pushy customer. The sequence culminates beautifully in her jolting realization, emphasized in the reframing of her from a new camera position, of the distance this initial meeting with Lem has taken her from the sensibilities of her cynical fellow urbanites, as they all share a jolly laugh at her corny, but sincere reply to Lem's polite farewell.

A critical stage in their progress toward one another is quickly reached as they experience the gulf between the outside world with its incursions and the cozy world of personal communion they have just established in the restaurant. A pair of remarkable shots crystallizes the mental pass to which they are separately led. Lem steps outside onto the street corner, buys a paper, and as he digests the news of the drop in grain prices, the camera dollies swiftly back to a reframing where he is closed off to our view behind a diagonal, elevated walkway, and a mass of people and vehicles which have moved in to inundate him. The shot precisely evokes Lem's feeling of his selfhood itself being obliterated

by the indifferent crush of city life. Kate returns to the painful contiguity of the billboard's paradise with her dingy, bleak apartment, invaded as it is by the sporadic violence of the trains blasting by, with their wind, dust and flashing lights, all rendered with such tactile vividness we can almost feel the pounding racket and smell with Kate the absent fragrance of the single blossom of her pitiful, struggling geranium. The scene ends with her gazing sadly at her mechanical bird chirping in its cage, an image which appropriately summarizes her attitude amidst the deprivation and longing that have been so poignantly impressed upon her by her city existence.

What we can infer from this presentation of Kate's experience of the city is a history of joylessly asserting herself against its impersonal forces, a stance whose consequence apart from keeping those forces at bay is to intensify her sense of deprivation and yearning. But if we see behind her thick skin and her defensive shell of cynicism a history too of expectations raised and crushed, such experience nevertheless has neither inured her to reality nor cured her of romanticizing, but merely made those hopes all the more dear and the shell weak at just that place where the world produces a hopeful face instead of the ugly one she is accustomed to expect. It is through just such a breach that she is about to project the full force of her pent-up wish-fulfillment longings onto Lem.

The opportunity presents itself on Lem's last day in the city when he violently ousts a particularly insistent masher and tells Kate, "I'd do that to anyone who tried to lay a hand on you." Kate's response to this (superbly acted by Mary Duncan), marks a critical juncture in her movement toward Lem. Kate is moved so deeply that it is as if we can see not only her breath, but her very soul catch within her; she is stunned, as if from a blow. Hearing in Lem's words the long-awaited promise of relief from her lonely struggle, she is impaled on the sword of her own terrific need. This seems to be a decisive moment. Kate is under the scrutiny of the restaurant manager and everything she holds dear seems to ride on Lem's ability to come through on his own initiative. So she melts here only to freeze when Lem, trying to discover her feelings for him, falters (significantly) on the word "love," and failing in his intentions, can only sputter out a weak "Do you like it here in the city?" At this the ice cube held in Kate's tongs falls back into the bowl.

Kate's precipitous plunge back into bitterness and disappointment here gives her away. Lem, once the Hick, has since evolved into a Knight in Shining Armor come to rescue her from the Dragons of the City and to carry her away to his Castle in the Country. But, that the prospect of her salvation can be dissolved so utterly by this single chink in her Liberator's armor is evidence of the power of the deeper impulse her idealizing bent has tapped into, which



requires that fantasy hold its promise to the letter. It is the impulse to yield up the burden of asserting the ego, to surrender the self into total passivity. Kate is misreading Lem's character according to her needs and thus, like Pa, calls Lem to task for more than he can legitimately be held accountable.

As if in answer to Lem's hesitation at the train station, the fortune ticket with its opportune message for Lem ("Marry the one you are thinking of and all will be well") intervenes to sustain their relationship by nudging Lem back toward Kate again in his hour of indecision. But if we discern more than the workings of mere chance in this fortuitous occurrence, nevertheless, certain things suggest that it is to be seen as something other than the unambiguous benediction Lem and Kate take it to be. For while the ticket gives Lem the impetus for moving in the right direction (toward his desire for Kate and away from the course plotted for him by his parents), it also points up the fact that Lem is still too much the adolescent willing to defer to authorities outside himself to guide his actions — that is, his parents' influence continues to hover ominously over him.

Kate meanwhile, having left her job to go after Lem, rushes to the train station only to find that the train has departed and, presumably, Lem with it. Returning forlornly to the restaurant she discovers Lem peering in the window, trying to catch sight of her inside amid the tumult and the steam. Kate practically collapses in his arms, and they repair to a drugstore in order for her to recover. Here the ticket finds its way again into Lem's hand, where it finally speaks to Kate the desire Lem has himself been too inhibited to utter. His courage bolstered, a "proposal" follows: ("If we get married right away we can be home by morning."). Kate's response to this, her exalted look of passion and relief, tells us that she is too emotionally caught up in the renewed prospect of hopes fulfillment to see that this constitutes another evasion of the troublesome question of intimate feelings. And in this look Lem sees all he thinks he needs to know about her feelings for him. What Kate takes for granted here is what Murnau suggests is her paradoxically positive action: her decision to leave the restaurant to go after Lem, a move which resisted the distorted notion which continues to guide her relation to Lem. Thus, the ticket serves as a sort of short cut for both of them around the intimacy and understanding they have yet to achieve, demonstrating their tendency, engrained by their social circumstances, to seek out easy answers to problems which will return to plague them later.

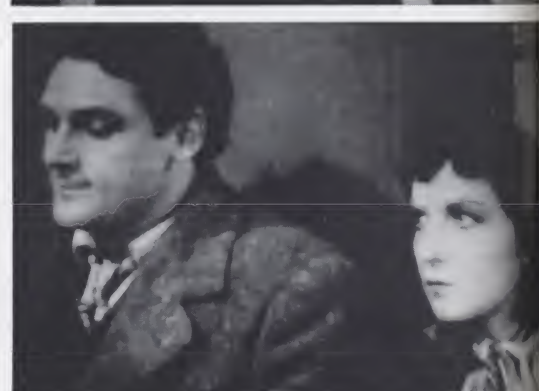
The train trip home to the country is summarized in the single image of Lem and Kate slumped together asleep on the seat. The tickets, now within handy reach of the conductor in the band of Lem's hat, mark the progress we have seen him make

through his relationship to Kate. But if the air and freedom at their destination burst in on Kate like the answer to her privation in the claustrophobic city, we are encouraged less on the whole to share her sensation than to understand it. The impression we receive here of unobstructed countryside expanses is limited to that which lies behind the couple in one shot as they walk away from the departing train, and serves only as a point of reference for the remainder of this sequence. Kate stops at the gate and surveys the seemingly endless landscape (now closed off to our view by Murnau's careful framing). Leaning on his chest, she gushes to him, "Oh, Lem, it's wonderful to have a home, and a mother and a father... and a man of my own... a real two-fisted guy... to take care of me." Whereupon Lem blushes, manfully hoists her over the fence and chases giddily after her. Their romp through the wheat field marks the high point of their relationship. The communion of Kate with Lem, and of the two of them with the world around them, is confirmed and heightened by Murnau's sympathetic tracking camera, sweeping us along with them in their exhilaration.

Any apprehensions Kate might have about her reception in the country are dispelled by the warm welcome given her by Marie and Ma. But the promise the country holds for Kate and Lem is rudely snatched away by Pa, whose entrance, looming in the doorway, is a dash of cold water on their sexual play at Ma's feet. Pa's wrath, sparked by the sight of the bridal bouquet of wheat Marie has given Kate, is stoked by the discovery of Kate's hat on the Bible, and finally vents itself, first on Lem, at the revelation of the price he got for the wheat, and then on Kate, as Pa questions her motives and slaps her soundly when she resists his grasp. In the aftershock of Pa's explosion, Lem obeys Ma's passive plea ("Kate, I can't strike my own father!") and Kate, distraught ("And this is our honeymoon!"), refuses Lem on their wedding night.

Kate, judging Lem by her dragon-slaying image of him, effectively seals off here whatever hope there might be of Lem's solving what is for him an already formidable dilemma. Lem has introduced the spectre of tabooed sexuality into a family where the parents' feelings have become so ingrown through their own moral discipline that a mere flicker of spontaneity from one of the children is sufficient to trigger a repressive backlash. Hearing the price of the wheat, Pa shouts, "If you'd been tendin' to my business instead 'a your own, you'd 'a waited"; his emasculating, eye-popping fury reducing Lem to a stuttering, shuffling child.

Although Lem must confront the Father, a physical confrontation here will not resolve the real issue for they remain opaque to all. There is more to Pa's disproportionate wrath than the threat to his money represented by Kate and more even



(1) Pa's ominous appearance casts a pall on the warm welcome of Ma and Marie. (2) Trouble with the wheat again. (3) Pa's reaction to Lem's confession. (4) Lem's reaction to Pa.

than Lem's implicit challenge to his moral authority. Lem, in fact, has fanned the coals of the Oedipal conflict, and in so doing fanned the anxiety Pa feels about his own precariously repressed impulses. And now is not the time for Lem to trigger the murderous potential Pa harbors, for it would solve nothing. What Lem must learn to throw off is the imprecations he is being implicitly urged to accept about his own sexual character and that of Kate.





*The hired hand's first sight of Kate.*



*Mac, delighted at the discomposure of Lem and Kate, and ready to take advantage.*

Having now divided Lem and Kate physically, Pa and his rural ethic begin to bear down on them in subtler ways, forcing them toward traditional sexual roles and stereotypes and threatening to permanently disunite them in spirit. When Pa confronts Kate alone after scolding Lem we glimpse part of the underlying reason for his repudiation of her. Kate, responding angrily to his accusations of greed, is brought up short by Pa's protective stance over Ma's empty rocker. The image is at first puzzling: Ma herself is not being threatened. Instead Kate is being rebuked for her aggressiveness by Ma's passive model of warm but ineffectual love. Ma's warmth, as we have seen in her inhibiting

*F.W. Murnau.*



Lem, only operates in a negative way; it simply has no force of its own. Indeed, Ma's vitality is so attenuated she seems hardly able to sustain herself on the screen when Pa is around. Nevertheless, the image she embodies is ubiquitous and insidious.

Kate feels its chilling effects at breakfast the following day when the vain, lusty hired men arrive, Mac in the vanguard, primed by the news of the unconsummated marriage. Pa notices Ma quietly laboring to serve them and gruffly calls that "other woman" out to share in the womanly chores. This, of course, exposes her to the men, who see in her only her contrast to Ma, a distinction to which Pa seems oblivious here. From Kate's point of view, we see their eyes glow at her demonically.

Later, during lunch break in the fields, Pa acknowledges this distinction, but in a context which only confirms his suspicions of her motives and her character. When he sees her accept Mac's hefting her up on the wagon, we can sense in his squinty-eyed disapproval that he is seeing only what he is already believing — Kate, the promiscuous temptress, has already found another man. That is, since men are attracted by women, it is the women who are to blame for their actions. Women must be kept in their place.

Ironically, Kate's continual rejections of Lem, which he cannot understand, only make him less able to resist his father's influence, and give Mac a wedge he is happy to exploit. At lunch break in the fields, Lem refuses the conciliatory plate of food Kate offers, clearly still smarting from the additional blow to his feelings of potency she dealt the night before. But resentment and self-doubt have not erased his interrupted desire. That night after the harvesting, he enters Kate's room when she is undressing and anxiously presses her to submit to the naive marriage ideal we know he has gotten from the fortune ticket. Kate doesn't see his confusion, only the veiled sexual coercion, and feeling shocked and entrapped, bursts out of the door only to run up against the next sexual oppressor in line. Mac, aroused both by Kate and by the door that has been opened for him, fairly burns with sexual energy. Puffing smoke from his nostrils like Siegfried's dragon, he admires Kate and then pridefully sizes up Lem. This extraordinary display of virility, coming on the heels of a second rejection, makes Lem feel even more diminished by comparison as he finds before him his nemesis — all that he should be for Kate, but that which he fears in himself.

Up to this point, for Kate, the country has revealed itself as a nightmarish reflection of the city, where the forces oppressing her are less desultory and tangential, more personal, direct and relentless. Kate, under the beady eyes of her grimmer taskmaster in the country, is forced to wait on a whole crew of leering macho louts, the worst of them soon to reveal himself as worse than any city lecher. From this point on, in the darkness which intensifies the already

heightened emotions, the shadows of confining social images — Ma's rocker, the grates of the lanterns wielded by Lem and Mac — fall over her like prison bars, driving her even further into the interior of the farmhouse. Kate has become her mechanical bird in the cage, with no Lem to help her, her choices narrowed to Ma or City Woman.

For Lem, more innocently susceptible, these possibilities stand to lock into place mentally when he confronts Kate in the farm house after hearing from Pa that he has seen Mac with his arm around Kate. Kate sees that Lem is still being swayed by his father, and indignant, declares, "You can believe what you want." But Lem in his emotional turmoil is not free to think what he wants, and falls back again on external expedients. It takes only the sight of Mac's hat on the table, reminding us of Pa disgustingly sweeping Kate's hat off the Bible: "I guess our marriage was a mistake."

The storm which arises then, as in *Sunrise*, seems to set the seal of doom on the marriage of Lem and Kate. The threat to Pa's wheat gives Mac the edge he needs to impress Kate by getting back at Pa with a vengeance she never intended. Mac has evolved from a more intense version of the city masher into a demonic substitute for Lem, standing up to Pa for her and offering a way out of another intolerable situation, in a perverse extension of the expectations she had for Lem. Mac with his blackmail threat literally backs her into a corner, and Lem is pushed out of the picture entirely.

Like the fortune ticket, however, the storm's role in the action is not what it first appears. By tipping the scales one extra degree, the storm allows suppressed emotions to vent, shifting the pressure off Lem and onto those who have exerted it unjustly on him, opening a path to his own sexual identity. Believing Lem to be lost, Kate relinquishes her illusion of him, and lets down her defenses. The unsolicited expression of love in the letter she leaves gives him the impetus he needs to act on his own, turning him around on a cathartic detour to Kate, leading past Ma, and her cautionary gesture at the door, through a fierce battle with Mac in the runaway wagon, to Pa, who waits at the gate with his rifle.

The film's controversial climax is the showdown between Lem and Pa, which culminates in Pa's surprising conversion. The studio backdrop against which this action is filmed, standing in for the actual landscape which we know to be there, lends to these scenes the quality of unreality. The images of Lem and Mac battling in the moving wagon and of Pa squinting into the darkness convey almost no sense of their physical surroundings, or of their spatial relation to each other. And the editing here is jerky, there is no back-and-forth flow, as in the country/city montage at the beginning.

*(Continued on page 44.)*



# TWO FILMS BY WERNER HERZOG

Werner  
director

By David Coursen

Herzog,  
of *Even*

*Dwarfs Started Small* and *The Mystery of Kasper Hauser* is one of the most strikingly original, imaginative, and poetic of contemporary film-makers. His films seem strikingly dissimilar in subject matter and narrative method. But what unites them, and what allows *Dwarfs* to coalesce from a collection of fragmented images into a coherent entity is Herzog's unique sensibility — his respect for his characters, his sense of landscape and visual composition, and his obsessive concern for the intersections of man with diverse natural and unnatural phenomena.

*Dwarfs* has virtually no story-line ("dwarfs raise hell" probably describes the "plot" about as well as it can be described), and several of the sequences are far from pleasant. The film has a harsh tone, as it seeks to confront its audience, aggressively demanding some kind of response. Even the title of the film seems to pose a kind of challenge; the word "even" seems particularly perverse, implying, as it seems to, that dwarfs are the last, rather than the first people one would think of as having "started small." And yet, despite its obscure "meaning", *Even Dwarfs Started Small* is a perfectly appropriate title for the film it names.

Herzog's overall creative approach is based on a consistent reliance on his own creative imagination; his films often seem to have been shaped almost directly from his unconscious. Of the camel that presides over the climax of *Dwarfs* Herzog has said, "I only know the camel has to be there." And, later, in amplifying the comment, he adds, "I have no abstract concept that a particular kind of animal signifies this or that, just a clear knowledge that they have an enormous weight in the movies." Herzog seeks to reinvent the cinema with each film, and, in the process of doing so, must follow the logic that the films themselves create, rather than a logic that he might impose from outside. Thus *Dwarfs* must be taken entirely on its own terms, responded to

without preconceptions. For example, the film is informed by a strikingly brilliant sense of composition; again and again Herzog creates visual images that are, in quite unconventional ways, perfectly composed according to the logic of the film. It is possible to appreciate the formal beauty of these images, but neither description nor analysis can do much to suggest their haunting lyricism. As a result, the film partakes of the mysterious, even of magic, and, in watching it, we are being admitted to a private, self-contained universe.

If some of the film's mysteries are sublimely impenetrable, many of its images are shockingly, perversely concrete: Baby pigs trying to nurse from their dead mother, chickens plucking at each other, an indescribably hilarious mock crucifixion. The very fact that Herzog chose to restrict the cast entirely to dwarfs and midgets is itself disconcerting. But as Herzog says (here, as elsewhere, quoted from a revealing interview in *Rolling Stone* #226), "There are no deformed people in my films. The dwarfs, for example, are well proportioned. What is deformed are the very normal, average things: consumer goods, religious behavior, table manners, educational systems..." If the director's natural order is one of lyrical harmony, the man-made order against which he juxtaposes it is one of shocking disharmony, human endeavor and a mixture of





persistence and futility. In the opening shot of the film, a dwarf holds a sign, continually turning it in an effort to get the right side up, never quite realizing (within that shot) that, up or down, he is holding the sign backwards. Later in the film, Hombre, the smallest of the dwarfs, tries without success to climb onto a bed. His efforts are futile and yet he persists, within the limits of his imagination and physical limitations, in the face of, and perhaps aware of, that futility, the whole sequence filmed without a cut. In one sense, Hombre's specific problem of how to climb onto a bed, is absurdly funny in its uniqueness, but his more general difficulty in confronting a world whose design is often inimical to the success of human endeavor is universal and commands our empathy as his persistence commands our respect.

The film is full of images that contain various mixtures of persistence and futility: Dwarfs raise sticks without ever quite hitting each other with them, a man drinks from a bottle that is nearly as big as he is, a crazed warden gives orders to a dead tree. Even the destructiveness of the dwarfs is random, focusing as readily on flowers, trees, and animals as on institutional food, eating utensils, and machines. Much of the action is presided over by a car that moves

in an endlessly repeated circle; its actions are initiated by the efforts of the dwarfs, but continue long after its initiators have lost interest in it. Perhaps one reason the kneeling camel does belong at the film's end is that it replaces the circling car as a presence that seems to preside over the action. If Herzog is deeply distrustful of the alterations man has made in the natural order of things, he still has — as with Hombre's quest to climb the bed — a kind of grudging respect for the resoluteness with which he pursues his follies. The final image of the film is of Hombre, laughing with an enthusiasm that wanes as his laughter is increasingly interrupted by fits of coughing. And yet, hollow though the laughter may be, he persists with it, and, as the film ends, he is still laughing.

From its opening moments, *Aguirre, The Wrath Of God* is shaped by the tensions between two approaches to film-making. The opening titles, fictitiously evoking the historical context of the conquistadors (an expedition, in 1560, supposedly led by Pizarro, who died in 1541) suggest a narrative film, perhaps even a fable about imperialism. Immediately thereafter, a breathtaking series of introductory shots, of clouds, of a vertical mountainside with a

fragile human chain descending, as much from the clouds as the summit, suggests a more documentary focus on man interacting with — and being overwhelmed by — his natural surroundings. In many ways, of course, the two approaches are complementary; the history of imperialism (as fictionally described, for example, in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*) is largely one of conquerors subduing natives and, in turn, being subdued by the land, often in the form of the jungle. For Herzog, the most visionary of contemporary film-makers, a fusion of the documentary and the narrative seems essential. Even his avowed documentaries, like *Fata Morgana*, often use their factual subjects as starting points for metaphysical imaginings. Conversely, the Herzog film most nearly devoid of "realistic" elements, the self-consciously stylized *Heart Of Glass*, nearly collapses under the weight of its pretentious literary ramblings. Despite a few similarly self-conscious grasps at literary "significance," *Aguirre* fuses the concrete and the poetic so successfully it's often hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. In fact, the making of *Aguirre*, in the jungles of South America, was reportedly almost as trying as the raft trip the film re-creates; thus art imitates life imitating art imitating life...



At the heart of the film are its remarkable landscapes. Herzog's sense of the physical world that surrounds his characters is extraordinarily vivid. From the first shot of *Aguirre* to the last, the antagonism between man and nature, and, more directly, between man's obsessive delusion that he can master his surroundings and the fact of his marginal place within them, never varies. The river's menacingly churning rapids and its endless calm stretches are equally indifferent to the needs, or the fates of its travelers. The land, whether in the form of a precipitous mountain slope or the endless mud of a newly-made trail or the impenetrable lushness of the lower jungle, is invariably inhospitable to invaders. Consequently, in one sense, *Aguirre's* landscapes are interchangeable as concrete expressions of the hostility of the environment to man. At the same time, though, the very intense, almost supernatural reverence with which Herzog films his landscapes makes each setting concrete and unique. Nor is the jungle inherently inimical to human life; it offers its native residents not only homes, but sanctuary from would-be destroyers. It is only those who would presume to master nature (*Aguirre*, when he rants that he is the "wrath of God"; boasts of his power to make birds fall dead from trees and to make the earth shake; an Indian compares the Spanish invaders to natural disasters) that find it hostile and foreboding.

The film's anachronistic references to Pizarro and Cortes, the most famous conquistadors, invokes the conquering power of imperialism obliquely. In the most eloquent speech in the film, Balthazar, a slave, recalls how he was once a great prince, so powerful his subjects dared not even look at him directly, and how the Spaniards robbed him even of his real name; as he speaks, his head is generally turned away, in shame and humiliation, from the camera and his listener. This scene, and the discrepancy between the power of the man's past and the degradation of his present, evokes conquistadorial destruction as no action sequences could. The prowess of the Spaniards in killing Indians is also given little visual emphasis; a native falling by the wayside, a soldier prodding a reluctant porter, an occasional chain on a slave are virtually all the film actually *shows* (though the narrator speaks of the Indians as "dying like flies."). Ironically, despite their kinship with the great conquistadors, *Aguirre* and his troops, though they occasionally manage to generate empty sound and fury, are essentially passive transients in the jungle, leaving their marks neither on the land that swallows them up nor on the river that capriciously controls their progress.

The jungle reduces the destructive powers of the white man to insignificance; even when he does wreak havoc, killing, pillaging, betraying, he usually does so against his fellows. When the Spaniards fire

guns at each other, men are killed or wounded; when they attempt to fire at their enemies, the shots are desperate, random, futilely aimed at the jungle itself. Even the act of setting fire to Indian villages is almost passive, since the first fires are set by Indians themselves. Thus the invaders are treated, despite their intentions, not as predators or destroyers, but as victims of the jungle and their own corrupt values, the poverty of imaginations that can conceive of nothing more heroic than gold or power or fame. For them, exploring uncharted territory, and the quest for the unknowable that implies, are reduced to the crassly venal. Thus the film's dominant image is of the sterility, futility, and vulnerability of life on the raft, where even colors are drained of their vitality, in contrast to the lush, dense, mysterious impenetrability of the jungle.

Describing the surface of the film's presentation of the Spaniards scarcely conveys its deeper complexity. By scrupulously controlling the film's point-of-view, Herzog subverts the audience's sense of detachment from the imperialist madness of *Aguirre* and associates, or, by extension, of Pizarro or Cortes or, more remotely, Custer or Conrad's Kurtz. *Aguirre* himself, for example is, in one sense, a ruthless madman, but he is also, particularly in his solicitude for his daughter, touchingly human. In addition, he is introduced as the film's only lucid, pragmatic character. The first words of the film have him prophetically declaring that "no one can get down that river alone." Later, he remains — if somewhat equivocally — a voice of rationality as he saves the expedition the pointless chore of burying the dead in "consecrated ground." Consequently, his downhill journey into madness is all the more terrifying. Through the action, he becomes an increasingly solitary figure, his deranged eyes blazing; even the swagger in his posture seems to make him lean back away from his surroundings. His lunacy is not only active — as he declares himself the "wrath of God" — but passive, as he removes himself from, and thereby accepts, the collective madness that surrounds him.

More emphatically, the film's point-of-view, in every frame and at every moment, places the expedition at the center of the viewer's consciousness. With the single exception of the opening shot of the clouds, every shot in the film either looks at the expedition or looks out at the world from it. When a raft is caught in a whirlpool and begins to drift hopelessly in an endless circle, it is shown only as the rest of the expedition sees it; later, an attack on the trapped raft is presented as a series of brief flashes of distant gunshots, piercing the darkness. Only when a rescue party has reached the rocks above the raft does the film finally look at it more closely. The grim implacability of the long shot's restricted perspective involves the audience as a participant in the desperate helplessness

with which the men watch the demise of their comrades. Much later, as a woman leaves the expedition, the camera again limits its view, moving with her until she comes to the edge of the group, it then pivots and, from a stationary position, watches her disappear into the jungle, the moment the camera pivots marking the limit of its field of vision. Similarly, the remote jungle appears only as a dark, mysterious, impenetrable foe. The natives along the shore, with the exception of a couple that boards the raft and then disappears without explanation, are shown only as distant menaces, invulnerable if not quite invisible. The camera's — and the audience's — participation in the expedition becomes most explicit when spears are hurled directly at the camera.

Growing out of *Aguirre's* control over point-of-view is a sense of the mysterious and the unseen that is almost palpable. The film is full of images of disconnectedness and, by extension, of isolation. Even the gunshots that are fired during *Aguirre's* mutiny literally come from nowhere; the sounds of shots become audible and bullet wounds become visible in the victims. Similarly, except for the spears hurled at the camera (none of which actually hit — that is, connect with — anyone) spears, arrows, and darts all simply materialize on the screen, as if propelled by unseen forces. The mirror image of this disconnectedness is the way the Spaniards fire their weapons into the jungle, futilely, desperately, not merely with no hope of hitting anything, but without even any specific targets.

This sense of the unseen becomes most concrete when a terrifying silence engulfs the raft. The men, isolated in space, alone and vulnerable on a river in the jungle, finally separated even from the sounds that, however tenuously, connect them to the jungle, become terrified, make noise simply to penetrate the deathly silence and disguise their isolation. But the jungle is completely indifferent to the sounds of the gunshots or the reed music of an Indian or the tongue-singing of *Aguirre's* most vicious henchman, or to *Aguirre's* psychotic ramblings, or to the stoic, equally futile silence of the deposed leader of the group. Finally, the Spaniards cannot escape the realization that they are outside of their human-centered universe. Natives along the shore see them only as food passing by. When *Aguirre* proclaims his wildest dreams of conquest, he cannot even repel the monkeys who have invaded the raft. The power and resonance of the film comes from the very vastness of *Aguirre's* descent from the center of the universe to a link in the food chain, or a bit of matter whose death will increase the rot and regeneration of the jungle. In the film's final shot, the camera envelopes the raft in a circle, a small point of space within the vast domain of the jungle, where man is a passing nuisance, of no more consequence than the arrows that so easily separate him from life.



# INTERVIEW WITH Alan J. Pakula

Photo © 1978 Don Perdue



The Dick Cavett Show  
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*The Dick Cavett Show*, a co-production of WNET/Thirteen, New York and Daphne Productions, Inc. is telecast nationally over the Public Broadcasting Service. Producer: Christopher Porterfield. Director: Richard Romagnola. WNET/Thirteen Executive Producer: Howard Weinberg. Funding for the series is provided by PBS stations and the Chubb Group of Insurance Companies.

There are two good reasons for printing this transcript. One is Alan J. Pakula and the other is Dick Cavett. Cavett is the sort of person you wish were interested in you. He is more a conversationalist than an interviewer, and when watching the program we are as interested in his literate sensibility as we are his guest. He responds to his guests fully, and they are forced to

respond fully as well. Alan J. Pakula, who does not seem to give many interviews, and yet who is such a good interview, reacts well to Cavett, and we are allowed to see him in a way no other interviewer would allow us. Joseph McBride once suggested that directors resemble their films, and in Pakula's case we see sophistication, understatement, and wit. His career has had its ups and downs, of course, but his failures tell us as much about life as his successes. In any case, had he not made another film since *Klute*, he would still require honor as creator of the best American film of the seventies. For a good discussion of *Klute* we suggest Robin Wood's **Film Comment** article of Spring 1972, pages 32-37. We would like to thank Stella Giammasi, Publicity Coordinator for **The Dick Cavett Show** for permission, and Mary Kelly of Daphne Productions, for her patience and encouragement in helping us get this transcript.

CAVETT: Thank you. Good evening.

Much better-looking audience than we had last night. (Laughter.) Same group. Thank you and good evening, as I said. In the movie world, this is the age of the celebrity director and, as you've probably noticed over the years, recently, when his name tends to get more prominence than the film, or titles, or even the actors... it's sort of surprising. My guest tonight is a refreshing exception to that. His name is Alan J. Pakula, which is not quite the household word, but when I mention the movies that he's directed, and I am about to, it will be instant recognition.

Mr. Pakula came to directing a little late, having started out as a very successful producer, and he's made relatively few films. Each one has been deliberately and... well, a distinct departure from the ones before. He began with *The Sterile Cuckoo*, which is an offbeat, bittersweet comedy in which he gave Liza Minelli her first movie



role as the waif-like Pookie Adams. Then he made *Klute*, in which Jane Fonda was so memorable as a bright, alienated call-girl surrounded by menacing forces. After that, *The Parrallax View*, with Warren Beatty, was a sort of nightmare vision of a syndicate that deals in assassination and intrigue and gets away with it. Then came *All The President's Men*, which was brilliantly dramatized...eh...or brilliantly dramatized Watergate, and incidentally may have reassured people who were a little upset by their idea of democracy after seeing *The Parrallax View*. Anyway, in his latest picture, *Comes A Horseman*, which is just coming out now, Mr. Pakula turns to the western genre with a difference. In this one he shows Jane Fonda and James Caan as small Montana ranchers in the 1940's struggling against cattle baron Jason Robards. So you see, even in the introduction Mr. Pakula's movies come first. But now we will meet the director himself. Ladies and gentlemen, Alan J. Pakula. (Applause, Pakula enters.)

You know, when I was going through that I was thinking when I said you were a producer first and then a director, there still isn't, I don't think, one person in ten-thousand (and I think I'm one of them) who can answer the question, "What exactly does a producer do on a movie? How do you become one?" Let's take *To Kill A Mockingbird*, as an example. What did you, the producer, do on that that you wouldn't do as a director?

PAKULA: Well, it's not much what I wouldn't do as a director... producers do all sorts of things and a lot of producers do nothing.

CAVETT: Some of them are the guy with the cigar who gets the money.

PAKULA: A cigar, yes. The most important is, he gets the money. Without the money all the artistic ideas in the world mean nothing, and you can sit around and fantasize about them. On *Mockingbird* I happened to call the writer's agent and said I thought there was a film in the book. I walked into her office and there was Harper Lee, who wrote the book, and she took a liking to me. I was rather young and boyish then and very enthusiastic and intense, and went down south and met her father who was the basis of the character Gregory Peck played. She said, "I'd like him to do it." So I got the rights to the book. I would say that was my major contribution. And then I worked on the screenplay with Horton Foote. And cast the film. The one thing the producer doesn't do — you can distinguish directors from producers by what producers *don't* do — and that is they don't direct the actors. They don't work with the cameramen. They should not be, as far as I'm concerned, on the set. Because if you have a director and a producer on the set, it's like having two

psychoanalysts. And the actors look to the producer for direction as well as the director.

CAVETT: Is that a rule on a Pakula set? Producers barred?

PAKULA: He's not barred. He's treated with great kindness and lots of smiles, but not much work gets done while he's there.

CAVETT: You don't exactly have the welcome mat out for him.

PAKULA: No, I'm in a very public business where I love privacy. So I have strange sets where, while I rehearse with the actors, my crew can be seen in poker games around a sound stage waiting to get back in a sound stage, locked out because I want privacy with the actors.

CAVETT: Not just for nude scenes?

PAKULA: Not just...I've only done one semi-nude scene and that was in *Klute*. And it was really very mild by today's standards. At that time, the crew just hung-out in the halls of the Americana Hotel.

CAVETT: That's funny, I don't even remember it. Was it when Jane took the dress down...?

PAKULA: There was a scene in the Americana Hotel and a john picked her up. No, she went into a john's room in the early part of the film. We improvised a good deal of that scene, but based upon specific notes. And we had a young prostitute technical advisor who sat with Jane and me the night before and said everything that she would do on this date. And she said the first thing that you would do is tell the john that he is different than all the other johns you have, and that you would like to charge him nothing, because for the first time you're attracted to him. He'll believe that and you'll get more money. The second thing you do is you make sure you get the money before you start because after it's over you get less. And Jane was wonderful that way. And she said, be very enthusiastic because you get more money that way. And Jane...(laughs)...was very enthusiastic, and I kept the crew out while she was being enthusiastic. (Laughter.)

CAVETT: Ah, ha. What are the chances of seeing that at your house sometime? (Laughter.)

PAKULA: Which version? (Laughs.)

CAVETT: Does that go on, by the way? Do outtakes in nude scenes get played around the BelAir circuit privately by directors? I've heard rumors of this.

PAKULA: I've heard rumors of it too. There are areas of Hollywood that make me feel naive. I've heard rumors and haven't seen. I think you might see them in New York before I see them in Hollywood.

CAVETT: But you used a real prostitute, or at least one of the people in our business who admits to being one. (Laughs & laughter.)

PAKULA: Yes, a less expensively paid one.

Yes. (Cavett laughs.) When I started doing *Klute*, I said I was looking for prostitutes for research. It's amazing how many people at the studio came up and said, "I happen to know somebody through a friend of a friend of a friend of mine"... and I had this huge list to go through. One of the girls we used was very bright and very helpful, except she was very old, unstable in her own way. And she gave the wildest excuse for being late I've ever had. She came into my office an hour and a half late for an appointment and said, "I'm sorry but I lost my contact lens on Sixth Avenue and I've been on my knees on Sixth Avenue for half an hour." The image of her on her knees on Sixth Avenue for a half an hour... (Laughter.) I don't know how much money she picked up, but...(Laughter.)

CAVETT: The word prostitute is so prissy sounding, isn't it? I just realized...

PAKULA: It's Victorian sounding.

CAVETT: Yeah. There was a girl being booked once in New York — a friend of mine was in police court — and the judge said to her, "You, my dear, are a prostitute?" And she said, "No, judge. I'm just a whore." And it has a...it's much clearer that way.

Are you the sort of director who...you seem mild-mannered in person...

PAKULA: In interviews, yeah.

CAVETT: In interviews. On the set, would I ever see you shouting at the actors, beating the performance out of them?

PAKULA: Well, I happen to think that people do terrible work when they're terrified. And the essence of acting is releasing something inside yourself and some actual emotional reaction. If you terrify people they tighten up and they start acting hysterically, and without reality, and you get terrible work. So I try to create a kind of easy environment. I don't always succeed. I like to feel that we're just doing this for fun some way or other. I tried that very much in *All The President's Men*, because people came on that set like we were doing *The Ten Commandments*, you know, and giving them to the world. I thought, God, if this film gets pretentious,



we're all in terrible trouble. So you try to keep things loose. Sometimes I succeed and sometimes they get very tense anyway.

CAVETT: When that film was made they asked a number of people to write something about it before it came out and I did for...I forget what publication... and what we liked about the screening, an advance screening I think. The thing I liked was that (number one of many things) was that it didn't go down sideroads into the backgrounds of the characters in any psychological sense, but really was like... almost a thriller. The facts, one after the other, what happens next and so on. That doesn't happen accidentally, does it? Is that a conscious decision you make *before* you make the film or...

PAKULA: That was a decision that was made about ten times during the making of that film. We kept agonizing over: should we show their personal lives? And a lot of scenes were written about their personal lives. I have endless research from Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein about the girls they were going with at that time, and funny and colorful things that happened to them at that time. We had a whole collection of scenes, we even shot one scene with Dustin and a girl. And it always seemed paranthetical. I mean, we weren't doing this picture about Woodward and Bernstein because they were these great Romeos with these wonderful and fascinating personal lives. It was what they did in their work. The minute we made that decision, finally, the picture got freed, and it's form became solid. Dustin never agreed with that decision, I don't think. He always felt that something...

CAVETT: Some good stuff was left out.

PAKULA: Yeah.

CAVETT: Actors always tend to, of course.

PAKULA: Yes.

CAVETT: Especially when they're right. (Laughs.)

PAKULA: Some bad stuff was left out too, though.

CAVETT: So there's actually another movie that exists of *All The President's Men*, almost. You could put all that together...

PAKULA: There's another movie of every movie I've ever done, yeah. And there are sometimes *wonderful* scenes that just hold up the film.

CAVETT: I just can't seem to get anybody interested in my brilliant idea. I thought it was brilliant — people yawn and

turn away from me when I mention it. To take something, even if it's an O. Henry short story, and give it to three directors — let's say, yourself, Ingmar Bergman, and Otto Preminger...it almost doesn't matter what three...and each of them unbeknownst to the other, what the other is doing, has to cast it, decide what style to do it in, and so on...

PAKULA: I've had the same idea.

CAVETT: (Cavett slaps his head.) When did you have it? (Laughter.)

PAKULA: Many, many years ago. When you...no... (Cavett laughs.) I thought it would be fun as an exercise.

CAVETT: Film students say...you know, people who are infeverished about film...in colleges and so on...it would be fascinating to see how each director did the same basic property.

PAKULA: You could do it on tape.

CAVETT: Even the Ford Foundation — Oh, on tape.

PAKULA: Yes, because it wouldn't cost that much. I think if it just took a few weeks you might get a few major film directors to do it. And it would be great fun.

CAVETT: Maybe Gulf & Western could finance it with the money they pulled out of this show. (Laughter.) We're not supposed to bring up personal things on the air.

Tell me something about *All The President's Men*. Awards, awards. That awful word: awards. *All The President's Men* won, I think, the New York Film Critics Award, the Critic's Circle Award, the National Film Critics Award...not the Critic's Circle, that's theatre...

PAKULA: No, no. It won the New York Film Critics', yes, and it won the National Film Critics Award...

CAVETT: I was wrong about the Critic's Circle, but there is another one. Three prestigious awards. ...and then did not win the Oscar. Does that tell us anything? Did it hurt the movie in any way? Did it hurt your feelings? Was Redford upset?

PAKULA: Redford didn't go to the Academy Awards, he hates those things. And he didn't want to go to the New York Film Critics Award, and I think went as a favor to me, in certain ways. I think Bob has this feeling that if you're going to say you're really going to care about the critics then you really care about the critics, if you say you don't then you don't. But you can't have it both ways.

I understand that. The Academy Award is...it's something of the spring season, it's a springtime rite in America. It's something like panty raids used to be and things like that. It's fun and it's a good game, and it's harmless. It's nice to be nominated and it's nice to win. But I don't know how much it means. I don't know how much *any* award really means, finally. Ten or fifteen years later you look at the picture that got awards and it seems you look back at them and they don't all stand up. It's gotten to a point where if you don't get an award, you give an award. I mean, I get a list of the people giving awards each year and it seems like if you have nothing to do you get a circle together and say, "Hey, let's call ourselves the Amateur Critic's Circle and we'll give an award." And they're all over the place. All over TV. Somebody's always congratulating somebody and crying, and thanking their mother and father.

CAVETT: Yes, I'd expect there'd be an award for the best award show before it all ends.

PAKULA: Yeah, I think...my favorite award show.

CAVETT: Woody Allen. I couldn't help noticing when *Annie Hall* won the Oscar, it did not appear in the ads. It still just says *Annie Hall*.

PAKULA: It did not appear in the ads because he insisted it not appear in the ads. Woody is a man of extraordinary integrity. I don't know how many people would have the guts to do that, for one reason: the Academy Award means money to a film. Supposedly it grosses more money if it wins the Academy Award. And he refused to cash in on it. However, in Los Angeles...he was not in Los Angeles and the L.A. papers had "winner of the Academy Award," I noticed one day. But Woody wasn't there to see it. He knows now.

CAVETT: So there *are* people with integrity in our business, aren't there?

PAKULA: Oh, a few. (Cavett laughs.)

CAVETT: The new film that you've done is a...well, should I call it a western or not? It's set in the west, of course. Was it a hankering to be in the footsteps of John Ford in any way? To do something set in the west?

PAKULA: It was never a conscious hankering, but I've never had a conscious hankering to do a picture about reporters or about prostitutes (or whores, or whatever). You never really quite know what's going to attract you, I find. You think you know and then suddenly something comes along and you find yourself attracted and you're surprised. No, I never



wanted...I never played with horses or "Cowboys and Indians" that much. I did a lot of it last year though.

CAVETT: Has it been a conscious decision that each of your films...it's hard to describe a Pakula film, I mean, there's no such thing, I would say, as "a Pakula film" in the sense that there's "a Hitchcock film," a film that has had its trademark imprinted upon it, you can tell who directed it by seeing ten frames of it, practically. Have you consciously decided to switch-hit, and vary?

PAKULA: I've decided to try different forms because it's a great challenge. I think you do your best work when you're nervous and when you're scared. If you start something and say, "I know how to do this," the chances are you know how to do it...not well. I mean, in a tired way, because you're using old nerve endings you used before. You're imitating yourself and that's a great danger to me.

*Horseman* is really a combination of two different kinds of films I've done. Before *Parallax* and *All The President's Men*, I spoke at the British Film Institute and the man who introduced me said, "Mr. Pakula's a man who makes films about the personal pursuit of happiness by people who have great trouble achieving it." Which was kind of true, based on *Klute* and a picture called *Love and Pain* and the *Whole Damned Thing* I did with Maggie Smith, and *Sterile Cuckoo*. Then I did *All The President's Men* and *Parallax* and they had to do with man and society, and really...in terms of personal stories, as you've pointed out, they were the least important part of it. *Horseman* combines both. It has a big overall canvas and it has a very intimate story. After my first two films I was called a woman's director, and then *All The President's Men* hardly had a woman in it. But what I think is special about *Horseman* to me is it deals with an American woman in the west. And the American woman is a hero. Not the American woman running after the horse in a callico skirt saying, "Please don't shoot. Please don't. Nothing's worth dying for. We'll go somewhere else." Or a pistol-packin' mama which they sometimes... those kind of parody, macho versions of men that some women have done.

CAVETT: One who grabs the gun from her fallen husband and shoots the indian dead.

PAKULA: Yeah. And she's a very specific kind of contemporary American hero, I think, and she's played by Jane Fonda who is a very specific kind of contemporary American hero to me.

CAVETT: Does everybody agree that Jane Fonda's growth is noticeable almost from film to film as an actress? She's



Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland in *Klute*.

very highly thought of here and in Europe as an actress — increasingly so, it seems.

PAKULA: We've worked together twice now. The first time was *Klute*, and she played a call-girl. Seven years later I see her again; you've spent all that time together day after day on *Horseman* and she's changed as much as anybody I know. When I first met her during *Klute*, she'd just been radicalized and just left her first husband and was making a lot of transitions. It was a wonderful time for her to play that part. She was tense, she was highly-strung. She was wonderful for that role. And now, it's all come together and it's matured, and it's mellowed. There were times during the making of the film when waiting for sunlight and waiting for all the darn things you have to wait for in a film, the actors get impatient, and people's tempers would start to go. And I said to Jane, "You should win the Nobel Peace Prize, not the Academy Award, for this," because she tried to keep us all happy. What Jane is today was wonderful for *Comes A Horseman*. What she was seven years ago was wonderful for *Klute*. I'm not sure she would play *Klute* as well today, I know she couldn't have done *Horseman* then. That's fascinating about what actors have to give at different times in their lives...

CAVETT: It really is, yes. You could probably point to careers that have failed because the roles were right, but at the wrong time. Too young or too old, or too unsophisticated or too whatever.

PAKULA: Yes, very much so. Or the attempt to play that same role over and over again.

CAVETT: It's always fun to have a director in your clutches and be able to say, "How did you shoot this scene?" I haven't seen this clip but it's an action one, and to me that's the most interesting part of making movies. I always want to be there when they shoot the action scene and find out how they did it. Can you think of anything we should know about the clip we're going to see or will it be self-explanatory in some way?

PAKULA: Well, I hope you'll guess from seeing it, it's a stampede.

CAVETT: Yes. (Laughter) And not a man pasting stamps in his album.

PAKULA: Yes, you might have to explain that with the picture or I'm in serious trouble at this point.

CAVETT: Here it comes right now, see if you can tell.

(Film clip: *Comes A Horseman*: cattle stampede.)

PAKULA: That's a cut down version. The full version can be seen at your local theater.

CAVETT: Yes, Jane had never looked better. I really thought she... (Laughter.)

PAKULA: Very subtly photographed. I said when I was shooting that sequence that the difference between Hitchcock and me is, Hitch said he treated actors like cattle, and I was treating cattle like actors. (Cavett laughs.) And they were giving me as much trouble as any actor's ever given me.



CAVETT: Don't you have wranglers on hand to handle that sort of thing? How do even they make the cattle turn left as they did or turn camera right?

PAKULA: You have wonderful men, I mean you have extraordinary men in Hollywood who do that. The stunt coordinators, the wranglers, they're all marvelous people. We did that over weeks and weeks and I made the most costly decision of my life. I decided to do this day-for-night. Now, day-for-night shooting means shooting nighttime in the day.

CAVETT: Shooting at night so it looks like day.

PAKULA: That's right.

CAVETT: Did I get it backwards?

PAKULA: No, shooting it...day so that it looks like night.

CAVETT: So that it looks like night. By how you expose the film?

PAKULA: Exactly, exactly. And you have to have back-lighting to do it. To outline the characters.

CAVETT: So those scenes were shot in broad daylight.

PAKULA: That's right. If we'd shot them at night, all you do is light a few cows and you don't see the land, and I wanted the perspective of the people and this land. That meant we had to wait for back-lighting in a valley that the Colorado Film Commission guaranteed us had nothing but wonderful light all summer, and was very dry. The name of the valley was Wet Mountain Valley; Hollywood people are very gullible. (Cavett laughs.) We went in there, and our first lunch after we were shooting we went into the local diner and it had a little mat there, and on the mat it said, "Wet Mountain Valley where it rains every day during summer to cool you." And by then it was too late.

CAVETT: Did you ever get the guy who victimized you in this colossal prank?

PAKULA: We had our fantasies. They also said no rattlesnakes, and there were rattlesnakes all over the place. But it was beautiful. The cattle...that sequence was shot over weeks and weeks, because you can only get the cows to go a certain distance. First you have to pen them up and then you do all sorts of things to get them running because they're not crazy about running. You shoot off guns and do all of those things. Well, the first time they run when the guns go off. By the second time they begin to realize nothing much is going to happen, and we're making fools of

ourselves. (Laughter.) By the third time, you say, "Bring in the new cattle." You have to get the dummies coming in.

CAVETT: Whereas, actors would do it three times. (Laughter.)

PAKULA: But they'd want a motivation for the third time. At least the cattle didn't ask for that. So you do it in these tiny pieces all the time, and then everybody runs for cover, too, because it can be dangerous.

CAVETT: Do you leave a camera in among the cattle when they're charging, with a man manning it or do you have a remote...

PAKULA: We had six cameras during all that stuff. You hide the camera in the ground, remote cameras. You have operators who are on the ground in little fortresses, little stockades, so the cattle can run around them, and then you have to coax the cattle to run around them. It's endless...I mean, it's amazing to me that stampedes ever got done. That was my first stampede you saw, and my last. (Laughter.)

CAVETT: Hello and goodbye.

PAKULA: Hello and goodbye, yes.

CAVETT: We only have a few minutes left and I'd love to hear you talk about something that bothers me in a lot of current movies, and that is, when I become aware that the actors are improvising and making it up. It irritates me. It seems to me that's a useful device that shouldn't show.

PAKULA: Yes, I've always fantasized the idea of improvising *Hamlet*. Because it gets to that absurd point, really.

CAVETT: To be or whatever.

PAKULA: To be or...you know...oh... exactly. I think improvisation is the most over-used and most badly used tool of acting, and yet it can be helpful. I've used it sparingly. It can be self-indulgent, it can also get an actor into the part. In *Klute*, Jane Fonda...I used it in the psychiatrist scenes and I did two and a half hours of improvisations with her. That took place all day and we kept sticking cans of film in the camera. And going, and give her a motivation and she'd start to go and we'd continue these sessions. I only did that then because I felt they'd be very dull scenes unless you felt her really building up to this breakdown of defense, if you really felt the revelation of what was happening to her, of what she was doing to herself, actually happened on screen. And I felt that the scenes themselves would not give her the time to do that. So we went on for two and a half hours. Out of that I think I used about four minutes on the screen. I have a

wonderful collection of marvelous stuff of when Jane Fonda goes to the psychiatrist, somewhere in my cellar. But that's a special case. I used it for actors who...for example, I start a film [*Starting Over*, Paramount] with Burt Reynolds, Jill Clayburgh, and Candy Bergen in two weeks. And there's a scene which is a divorced men's workshop. It's a comedy and I have concerns about the actors going right into the laugh lines and starting to play cartoons and not getting a reality. So, what I will do is, I'll start them out by improvising. Improvising relationships between them. Improvising things we'll never see on screen, so they become the characters. They have to concentrate, they have to relate to each other and then after they've gotten that and they've gotten that kind of reality, and they feel they belong together, then we'll go to the lines. Then I'll shoot the lines.

CAVETT: There are directors who won't have anything to do with improvisation, aren't there?

PAKULA: Yes, I seem to be the middle-ground on that. There are people like John Cassavetes who does nothing but, and there are people like Alfred Hitchcock...

CAVETT: ...who are horrified at the idea.

PAKULA: I hear that an actor once came to a set of his and said, "I have notes on how to do the scene differently, not as written," and he said, "There are other actors acting here and I think you ought to do it as written." There was no way he would allow that. I find it useful, cautiously. But also it can be indulgence. The other danger is, actors get so proud when they're improvising: "Hey, look how real I sound." Well, reality just is not enough. Drama should be revelation. It should have economy.

CAVETT: For reality you can put the camera on the street.

PAKULA: Yes, exactly. People can sit and stare at themselves in the audience, look at the person sitting next to them. That's real.

CAVETT: Yeah, but not terribly enlightening sometimes.

PAKULA: No. And yet again there are the exceptions that prove the rule, there are certain actors that can do extraordinary work improvising.

CAVETT: You have a luxury we don't have. We're being stampeded by the clock. Alan Pakula, goodnight.

PAKULA: Goodnight.

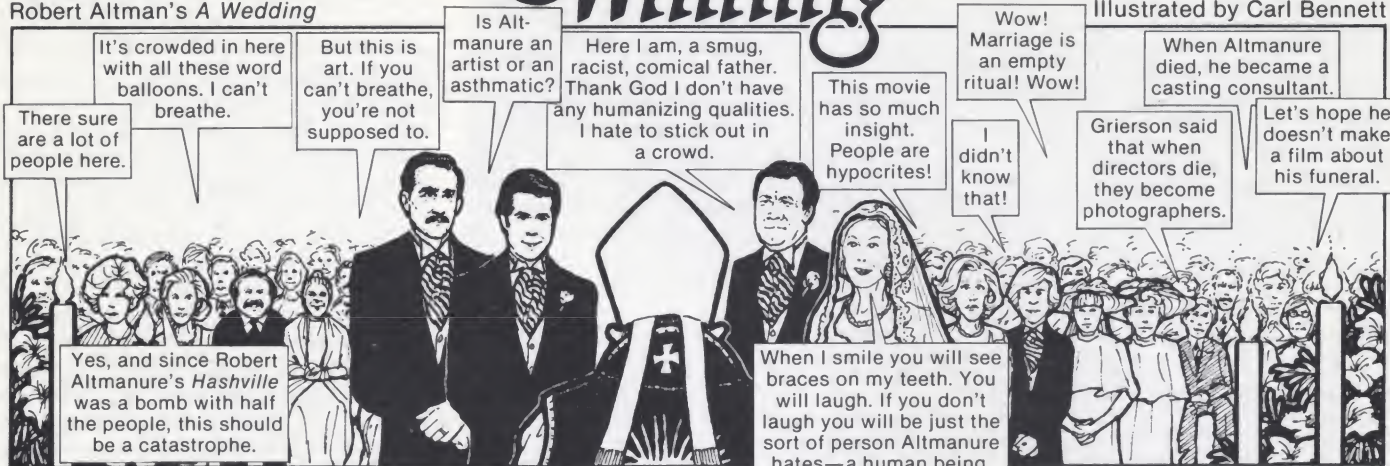
CAVETT: Thank you for being here.



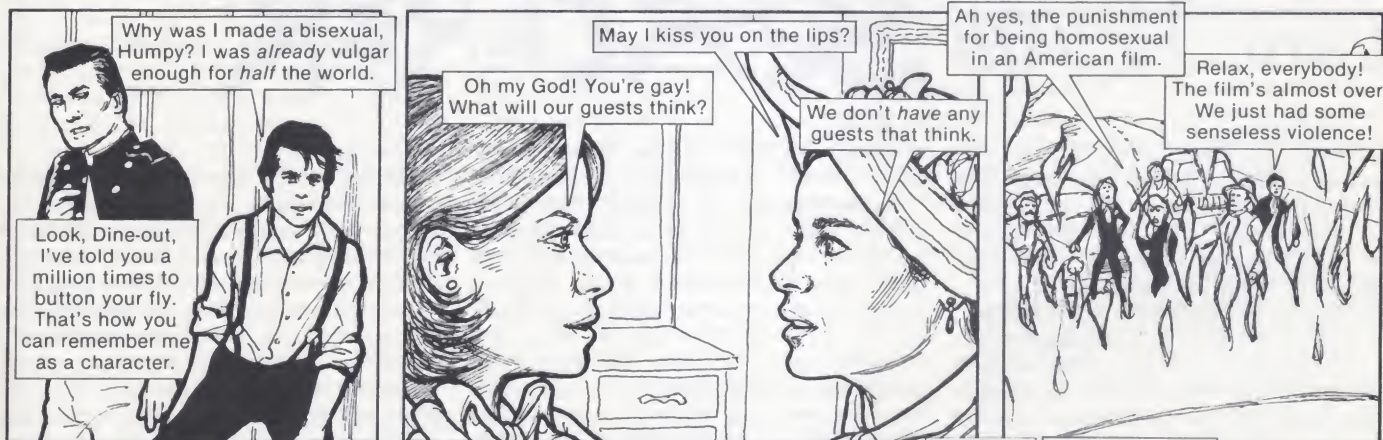
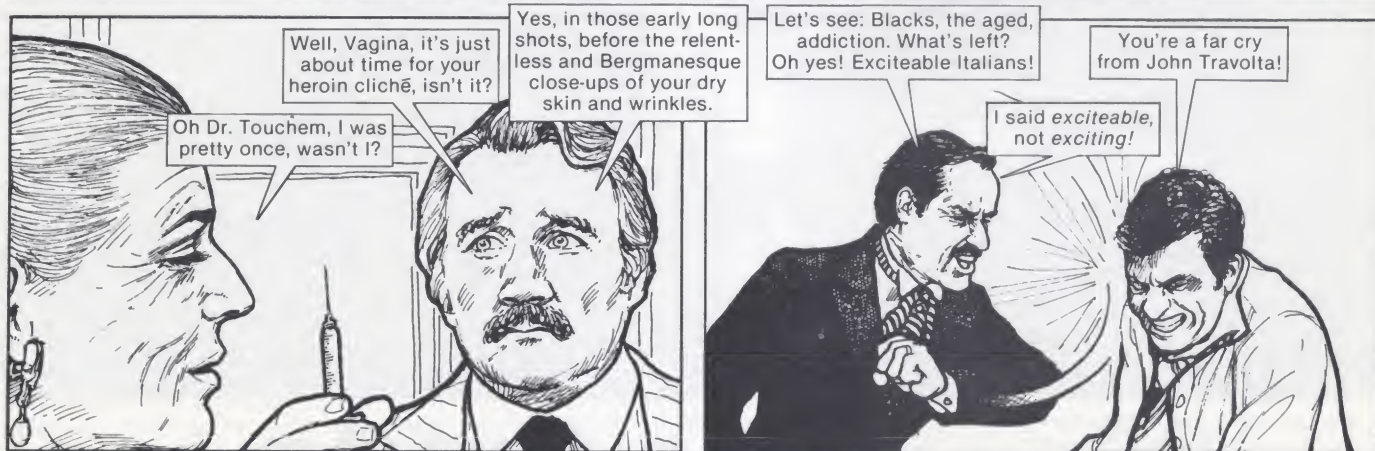
A graphic review of  
Robert Altman's *A Wedding*

# Whining

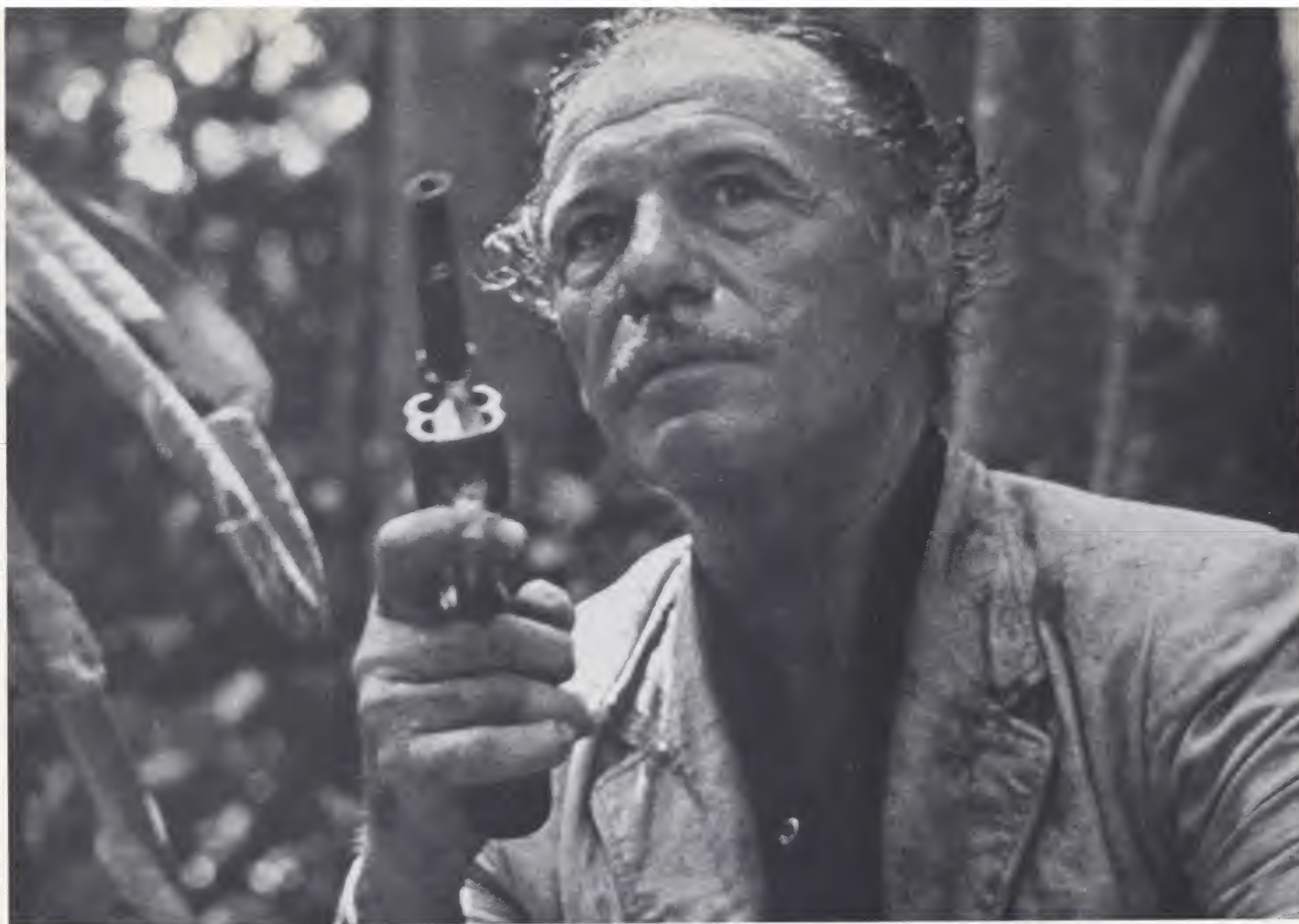
Written by Douglas Holm  
Illustrated by Carl Bennett











# Film Maudit: **SORCERER**

By Gloria Heifetz

*Sorcerer* is a bleak, harsh, and uncompromising film, adjectives that may have reflected the inner state of William Friedkin after the reviewers were done with him. It had the misfortune to appear around the time of *Star Wars*, and although the simple-mindedness of that film was decried, *Sorcerer* was found to be confusing, pretentious, and most evil of all, depressing. A certain conformity seized even the lowliest writer, and only the single brave voice of *Newsweek's* Jack Kroll rose to defend the film. It is amazing how attitudes sweep through the press, but considering the financial failure of the film, perhaps the sociological indifference of audiences merely found feeble articulation in the media.

I think *Sorcerer* is superior to both Georges Arnaud's original novel, *The Wages of Fear*, and the film from it directed by Henri-Georges Clouzot and written by Clouzot and J. Geronimi. The "existential" novel was published in the U.S. by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 1952. The Clouzot film follows the book closely, but with certain changes in structure and temperament. The novel opens directly with the explosion at the Crude Oil Corporation's oil field in Las Piedras, Guatemala. The main

character is Gerard Sturmer (Mario in the movie, Jackie Scanlon/Juan Dominquez in *Sorcerer*) just the sort of person one would expect in the quickly drawn atmosphere of the grubby town and its stolid roll call of 20 other men, hiding and trapped. There is much anti-American attitudinizing and talk of fear as a "colorless liquid" and much colorless swearing. The 300 mile truck journey is set up and begun in a matter of a few chapters, and there is crying, railing against life and American imperialism. Gerard actually *has* his own Linda — she is not just a Hollywoodesque role stuck in the film for Clouzot's wife. Here is an example of the "tough" and "spare" dialogue which the novel presents, taken from page 90 of the Avon edition (Norman Dale, Translator):

"A little later [Johnny] turned to Gerard and cleared his throat. He had something rather difficult to say.

"Hey — Gerard."

"Well?"

"Thanks."

"Thanks for what?"

"Well, for not leaving me in that ditch when I let you take those bends on your own. You're all right, Gerard."

"For God's sake!"

"Yes, you're all right..."

Besides Gerard there is Johnny Mihalescu, a Rumanian who once stabbed his best friend in Tequigalpa; Juan Bimba, a Stalinist Spaniard; and Luigi Stornatori. The events of the drive are echoed or expanded for the film, but the book concentrates on the shifting tensions between Gerard and Johnny of fear and courage. The film adds scenes that give the sociology mobility. For the most part characterizations are carried over to the film intact. Johnny becomes Jo, and Gerard Mario. Rather than committing itself immediately to the catastrophe, Clouzot's film spends the first twenty minutes or so setting these characters. When it occurs, the four obvious men are selected, and the mission begins with Linda clinging to the side of Mario's truck exuding nihilistic romantic passion. The units of suspense are the washboard, the platform, the stone, the pool of oil, and the final leg of the journey, the delivery, ending in a twist, Mario, in his exuberance, accidentally driving off the road and killing himself, all of which have comparable analogues in *Sorcerer*. (The gust of air that blows away the tobacco of Jo's cigarette as a predecessor to the explosion that kills Luigi and Bimba is particularly



good — there is no similar scene in *Sorcerer*). The film making is adequate, the scenes are tense, particularly after the tedium of the films opening, but the constant interruptions that illustrate Jo's descent into crazed abjection are repetitious and annoying. The intended comparison of Mario and Jo, though beneficial to Mario, doesn't seem to go anywhere, and the pacing of the film is thrown off by this intermittance. Thematically the points are made. We understand the moral differences between them. Unfortunately, the final two of the four drivers are not well-communicated to the spectator; as characters their deaths mean nothing because their lives meant nothing to us. This imbalance, among other defects, leads to the detachment one feels while watching the film, a detachment different in quality from that felt while watching *Sorcerer*.

Friedkin solves this problem by the use of four opening vignettes introducing the four principals; Nilo, whose first, shortest, and least important scene realizes the air of sudden, fated death; Kassem, the politically engaged arab terrorist, a reflection of the terrorist guerillas who bomb the oil-rig in (apparently) Chile and who actually kill him later; Victor Manzon, a French businessman caught in a fraud, in his desperation deserting his beloved wife, finding Porvenir eggs a sharp contrast from lobster, (reminding one of the contrast developed between Charnier and Popeye in *The French Connection*, realized in one particular shot with a zoom, and a contrast of warm restaurant colors and cold street gray); and finally Jackie Scanlon, who is given poetic profiles, utilizing Roy Scheider's incredible face, and the photography of John M. Stephens and Dick Bush. Scheider is the spiritual center of the film, being the "ordinary" fellow of the lot: though a hoodlum, nowhere in the performance is there any sense of evil, maliciousness, or extremes, which make him most likely to reflect the self-image of the spectator.

Friedkin is the poet of frustration. Gene Hackman's embodiment of it in *French Connection*, where Charnier eludes him on the subway, and Tony Lo Bianco on the freeway, are studies of the emotion. Although frustration plays a certain role in *The Exorcist*, especially in Jason Miller's attitude to his mother and later the Devil, it is hardly the principle element. Even lesser films, like *Boys in The Band*, the oddly tilted *Birthday Party*, and the otherwise execrable *Night They Raided Minsky's*, with its triad of frustrated show and anti-show people, offer variations on this theme. Not until the cast of *Sorcerer*, however, have despair and futility had such an overall physical manifestation. Hackman was perfect, of course, and the subtle touch of his hat flying to pieces understated the shattering outcome of his driven nature (Popeye's mostly un-commented-on boot fetish makes thematic, though not psychological, sense by

pointing his sexual drive in the direction of an item of apparel most used for basic locomotion, appropriate for a character constantly giving chase).

Walon Green has given Friedkin a script of supremely fluid structure and tempo. It can be divided into approximately five parts: the opening vinettes; the interlude setting the scene of entrapment in Porvenir; the blowing of the well and Corlette's selection of the men; the drive; and Scanlon's return. Scenes of quietude (the funeral march, the departure of the trucks) follow or precede perfectly balanced scenes of excitement (the riot, the brilliant "grind" montage) creating a hypnotic and yet satisfyingly full effect.

Before discussing the film section by section, and in order to show the difference in tone between *Sorcerer* and its predecessor, I want to compare the piss-comaraderie scene in *Wages of Fear* with — nothing. *Sorcerer*, bleak, and unromantic, does not offer friendship as a scale by which to judge life. One little scene in which Manzon reminisces precedes directly his death (but this could be merely ironic, rather than "fated"). Clouzot's scene is touching and is consonate with the thrust of the film, but given the isolation of Green/Friedkin's characters, whose occasional happinesses are frustrated, the ambience is different and, I think, improved.

After the opening (each environment is shot in a slightly different fashion) and particularly after the cold blues and grays of New Jersey, we find the, perhaps misleading, soft yellows, greens, and blues of South America (according to Scanlon's work permit, it is September of 1976). There are a number of scene-setting shots, moving progressively from long to close, culminating in Scanlon's sudden awakening, from a nightmare, at the screech of a slaughtered pig, a scene created with a rarely communicated felt reality. (Having read in Key's *Media Sexploitation* that Friedkin allegedly used certain subliminal effects in *Exorcist*, I was extremely curious about the brief unidentifiable shots that flicker just prior to Scanlon's awakening, resembling to the futile, but fiercely focused eye, roosters. After a good deal of trouble I was finally able to look at a print frame by frame, and the shots, 15 in all, actually are of a rooster, one we see earlier. However, to save others the silly effort of running down the film, I herewith print a list of the shots:

- Scanlon's hand on sheet
- 24 frames of a dead hood on the street
- Scanlon's hand
- 24 frames of bars, before a white wall
- (Frames 1 - 5) The rooster moving right, ducking its head in normal movement.
- (6) A white frame
- (7) The rooster
- (8) The rooster with its head ducked
- (9) White, faintly negative, of 8
- (10) Rooster, head ducked
- (11) White, faintly negative, of 10

(12) Rooster's head ducked

(13) The same shot as 12, printed negative

(14) The same shot as 12, but white

(15) Scanlon's hand again

The orchestration of these simple frames to create a jolting nightmarish effect is amazing.

The peacefulness of Porvenir is an illusion. Such shoved-in-the-corner sights as a man carrying the severed head of a goat, (also appearing at the film's conclusion) contribute to the disquiet, the relentless seediness. There is the quietude of the four opening locales, which disguise violence and deceit, epitomized by the enormous formal Catholic wedding, in which the bride has a black eye, and the schoolgirls walking the street before Manzon's house. Manzon's wife, literate and loving, is the focus of the humane possibilities of life, by virtue of the gift she gives her husband of the watch (which still is not enough to get him out of Porvenir — we are made aware that necessary human qualities of kindness and love have no value in this dark underside) as well as by the short exchange between them that sets the tone for the struggle the men endure against the limitations of life and themselves.

"The cannons were trained on the village," she reads from the military memoir she is editing, about which he asks "Another soldier poet?" and she replies, "More philosopher than soldier." "Soon I would lower my hand and the firing would begin. Through my field glasses, I could see a woman with a jug of water on her head, walking slowly toward her home as she had always done. In a second, my simple gesture would remove her from the face of the earth. Whose gesture would remove me? When and how would it come?"

Manzon: And did he lower it?

Blanche: Yes.

Manzon: Then he was just a soldier.

Blanche: No one is "just" anything.

We could reduce the film to this maxim, but Friedkin's compassionate but unsentimental realization of the film prevents the phrase from diverting us from the true vividness of their fight against despair. However, it lends a mature respect to the men at the film's conclusion. When the hoods come to get Scanlon, part of our disappointment arises from our knowledge that they are coming from another world, operating under the same thesis as Manzon, that Scanlon is "just" a cheap hood, which conflicts with our appraisal of him.

All societies are two societies operating side by side, the innocent and the dark. In Porvenir, it is mostly dark that has superseded the usual need to disguise, to hide the inevitable darkness, summarized as death. The morbid shorthand of shots of the dying, burnt men at the oil field emphasize the outrage of sudden death, in this case caused by guerillas, which hangs like a stench over the rig, Porvenir, the world. It is Camus's sense of man living under sentence of death. When the burnt carcasses





Victor Manzón (Bruno Cremer).

are delivered to the town wrapped in plastic and dripping with blood and pieces of flesh, the stunned silence of the crowd turns into irrational rebellion, towards the oppression of the corrupt government, and toward the tyranny of death itself.

Yes, yes, *Porvenir* can be seen as a metaphoric condensation of life itself. After the sabotage, there is a beautifully acted scene between Corlette (Ramon Bieri) and his superior in COREPET: the situation is set up. Four men must drive the nitro 218 miles to the field. Corlette is another moral force in the film, the familiar man-doing-a-dirty-job character, but the actor's skill gives the character a ragged, tired humanity. The film's focus is temporarily him and his frustration. "I've seen worse" his explosives expert tells him, but this doesn't make blowing it any easier. The announcement to the village follows, and then the excellent montage, in a film that is almost all montage, of the potential drivers being tested. Scanlon, a driver in his previous life, does well, as do the four other most desperate men, each driving in a fashion that articulates his character. In a humorless film as is this one, even the gag of the bad driver knocking down the men in the bed of the truck contributes to the malaise; on a miniscule level it reiterates the suddenness of life's, usually deadly, jolts. A second montage follows quickly, brilliantly: the men assemble two trucks ("Sorcerer" and "Lazaro") from the wreckage of several. The music of Tangerine Dream, here, as elsewhere, supplies the emotional continuity of pursuit, drivenness (much could be written of Friedkin's use of sound,

as in for example the transition from New Jersey to *Porvenir*, with the gradually-louder el abruptly superseded by the dawn, birds of South America. The roar of the second bridge scene contributes to its tension by virtue of its giving the spectator no relief from the scene's doom-filled possibilities). Nilo, who also wants out of *Porvenir*, waits and watches silently, while his ultimate victim, Marquez assists the others. The combination and succession of the different framings, camera movements, and lighting situations must be seen to be appreciated, culminating in the beautiful shot of the switching on of a truck's lights.

Now the specificity of frustration is realized. Rather than the metaphoric city of stasis *Porvenir*, now a chain of incidents engage the spectator in the plight of the four men. Though their numbers are reduced until only Scanlon remains, each obstacle is overcome: the two bridges, the tree, delirium. The careful character construction pays off as the interactions resonate under the weight of each crisis. Manzón assumes a take-charge attitude, Scanlon grubby greed and exasperation, Nilo both calm and cowardice, and Kasem angry determination. The tests-of-wills between each one is the very essence and evolution of the journey, the dictation of its form, and a response to its content. Ingenuity destroys the tree, but once it is gone, they relax, and Manzón begins to reminisce. Just as earlier Scanlon's contemplation of happier moments precedes problems, so Manzón is doomed. Sex is Friedkin's shorthand for communion, relaxation of the will, and peace, leading

inevitably in this severe film to slip-ups. Existence is relentless and impatient. As he speaks of Paris, their tire is shot out, and Manzón and Kassem are killed. They are not "just" anything, despite the efforts of life to confine them.

The cliff-hanger ending is well-prepared for. The town's cops are there in the cafe, and we know from a previous scene that they want part of Scanlon's reward. The plane overhead, we soon discover, carries the hood and Scanlon's betraying friend. Corlette gives Jackie the letter Manzón gave him, but once again the fate of the letter is questionable, as "*April in Paris*" begins to play, and Scanlon (in an *Asphalt Jungle*-inspired moment) begins to dance with the old woman. If only he had left immediately... Again, like the sex talk between Nilo and Scanlon, and the Coke ad (where the segmentation of the ad into three shots builds up the gag of the Coke bottle in the model's hand), the desire for warmth and solitude lead to trouble. Just as the pretty girl holds a Coke, just as *Porvenir* hides violence, and a wedding ceremony hides oppression, so does the seed of sentimentality spawn self-destruction. The plane that before had represented freedom, now brings potential death. It would have been vulgar of Friedkin to show the climax that seems inevitable. Instead the camera pulls back from an explosive situation. The continuation of life's struggle is suggested. The ending does not so much doom Scanlon as pause before another crisis. After all, just as he was the single hood to escape the car accident, and the only one of the four drivers to survive, he may once again prevail. We know that, if he does, he may never rest again.





# Auteurism: Theory as against Policy

by William Cadbury

## I.

In Fritz Lang's *Destiny* the heroine gets from Death a series of chances to restore her love to life by rescuing him, in various avatars, from malevolent authority figures. They are too strong. She loses and the lover dies every time. But Death gives her another chance. She need only find one life to be given up for her lover's, and he will be returned to her. She finds a baby in a burning building to hand over to Death. Just what she worked for is in her grasp — but she cannot take it. She lowers the baby to safety, turns, and goes off with Death, herself to die and meet her lover elsewhere. And just so Joe Wilson in *Fury*, Jeremy Fox in *Moonfleet*, Sonja in *Spies*, Frank in *The Return of Frank James*, Dave Bannion in *The Big Heat*, and Tom Kent in *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* turn at last from revenge or safety and act morally. They are tempted to immoral self-assertion, but return from the moral brink.

But in other Lang films there is no such return. Sometimes the characters see the errors of their ways too late. Then they may repent at leisure like Countess Told in *Dr. Mabuse*, while she is imprisoned by Mabuse and longs for the husband she despised when she heedlessly sought "sensation." More often, the characters are driven by social or personal injustice into catastrophic action. The action is often largely justified, yet it dooms them to death or madness: thus all three major characters of *Rancho Notorious*; Eddie and Joan Taylor in *You Only Live Once*; Brunhild in the first part and Kriemhild in the second part of *Die Nibelungen*; Vance Shaw in *Western Union*; and (despite the tacked-on "happy" ending) Alan Thorndike in *Manhunt*.

Sometimes, finally, the characters are driven from the start by inner fury or torment, for reasons which have little to do with response to oppression or loss. They are carried to their destruction by the very force of their own singleness of purpose: thus Becker in *M*; Haghi in *Spies*; and Mabuse, Professor Baum and Professor Jordan in the three *Mabuse* films, Joh Fredersen, in *Metropolis*, allows himself to stir up his own world to cataclysm, by means of Rotwang, an evil projection of himself. He is only saved by his moral projection, Freder, who performs that return from the brink which Fredersen cannot perform himself. Like Mabuse's, Joh Fredersen's hair turns white at the climax.

Yet there is an underlying similarity to the issues and attitudes of films as different in outcome as is pulling back from the brink from taking the plunge. Lang, we can say, investigates various aspects of a situation central to his vision. People in Lang are pressed upon by something — some regimentation, some weakness in the fabric of society, or some deep personal loss — which tempts them unbearably towards a rejection of the morality which at the same time it demands. But for their part, individuals have dangerous drives, a capacity to lose control, and tendencies to become other than their moral selves in revenge or hope or desire. The inner force explodes upon the outer rot in cataclysms of fire and flood. The characters act with a crystalline morality of self-sacrifice or with a passionate self-destructiveness, depending on what aspect of the tension-bearing issue Lang's creative imagination emphasizes in the individual film.

Even within a single film there may be virtual balance of the conflicts. We are certain that Becker, the child-molester in

*M*, should, like Mabuse, be caught. Yet we know that Mabuse was tempted by an equivocally decadent society, and that Becker is both driven from within and terribly alienated from others. We are drawn into sharing the manhunt for Becker, but we see that cops and crooks alike find him simply an obstacle to business as usual. It is clear that their harrying him is a social projection of the lusts and drives from which Becker suffers alone, but of which we see plentiful evidence in members of all the groups which converge upon him in the film. There is a plague on both houses here. It is terrible to be driven by one's demons, but organizations are as heedless of Becker's humanity as he of the humanity of the girls he murders: the cops and crooks and beggars and bourgeoisie are terrible too.

An "auteur policy," as Andrew Sarris has taken to translating "la politique des auteurs," the idea behind the study of film history in terms of the canons of directors, might well yield an analysis of the two strands of the Lang canon of the sort suggested here.<sup>1</sup> Such a policy is adopted in order to discover the characterizing vision of a director by inspection of the whole corpus of his or her film, and it is therefore a policy of unabashed induction. Its appeal, as Sarris has always said, is to the whole body of a director's work. From the simultaneous mental inspection of the films of a canon, it is argued, the evidence of the informing authorial sensibility will stand forth. Likewise, the argument for a particular reading of a given film must always appeal to the whole canon.<sup>2</sup> One cannot comprehend the place in film history, the aesthetic worth, or even the meaning of the individual film, unless one can understand how it takes its place in its natural context — that is, how it deals with problems of



aesthetic choice, thematic implication, and accommodation to convention and fashion, in ways fathomably related to those of its neighbors in the canon.

There are certain limits to the claims one can make under such an appeal. Under an auteur policy one can show resemblances of aspects of films, and even claim (rightly, I think) that the whole sweep of film history demonstrates that the resemblances of films as they are arranged in "directional bundles" are by all odds the most rewarding for aesthetic analysis.<sup>3</sup> Under the auteur policy, however, one cannot actually analyze an individual film, whether one knows its author or not. An inductive policy's chain of inference pulls the wrong direction. From the qualities in a set of films one can infer a pattern of resemblances among them, and argue for the value of treating the films as a "bundle" on the basis of the qualities of the whole set. But one cannot infer, from the pattern, the determinative force of the qualities emphasized by the pattern in the individual instance. After all, the film's form may be dependent on structural relations that appear nowhere else in the canon, even though some hallmark images or sequences turn up. Indeed we might find just those relations in the single film that we find in the bundle — but where in our policy did we give ourselves license to say that those relations which recur must be the ones under which one ought to organize the reading of the single film? Surely we ought to read a film as it deserves to be read, not as its context encourages us to read it? With a policy of induction we can "prove" authorship of a bundle of films. But without a theory of the significance of such qualities as we find in directional bundles to the individual films from which we inferred them, we cannot "prove" that a film should itself be analyzed as we are suggesting, and hence we cannot finally make the claims we want about the authorial vision. For even if we picked up a striking pattern of resemblances and permutations, we would still have to admit that each film of the group might be organized, in those key ways which give it its aesthetic value, absolutely on its own and without any crucial similarity to the other films with which it might share some or indeed many of what anti-auteurists are so scornful of, "directorial touches."

So, lacking such proof that the resemblances in a bundle are crucial, we can be comfortable neither with our analysis of the individual film nor with our synthesis of the qualities of the bundle. We may have spotted a pattern which holds it together. We may feel that the pattern is the one that counts, and our exposition of it may be in fact an *ostensive proof* that it is the right one — "See, here's the pattern, now deny if you can that I've got it right." — but we haven't *grounded* our exposition so far in a rationally expounded theoretical framework, something which can stand up to those charges of our subjectivism and

imprisonment in Imaginary illusions (stemming from our Cartesian efforts of trust in "the subject") which are being brought against us by Brian Henderson, Lacanians, and the whole proto- and neo-semiological pack.

But I think we need not be embarrassed by Descartes (Chomsky isn't, and it is his influence, rather belatedly received, which has caused the whole current awkward shift from Saussurian to Lacanian semiology), and I think something can be said for an "auteur theory" grounded in outright acceptance of "the subject."<sup>4</sup> Under such a theory an individual film would have a *proper analysis* in terms of the theory (which would itself be rationally grounded) in addition to offering a set of attributes to be processed inductively as evidence bearing on the nature of an authorial bundle. An auteur theory would say that certain things count for authorship because they are the things which count for the meaningfulness of the individual film.<sup>5</sup> Analysis of individual films in the terms the theory prescribed would yield a set of qualities which we could use, with other analyses, to constitute the characterizing pattern of resemblances in a canon in terms of the theory. With that set established, we would be justified in inferring, when we found a member of that set of qualities to be determinative in an individual case, that the case was in fact one of this vision and not of some other, even though the author with that other vision might be responsible for certain aspects (though not of course the determinative ones) of the film in question. And this would be possible because the theory, as a theory, asserts a *specific relationship* between the authorial vision and the qualities of specific films. It is the relationship of "being described in the same principled terms," namely the terms of the theory. But an auteur policy, as a policy of induction, can only assert that inspection of a director's canon will yield a pattern of resemblances among qualities of member films.

A perfect opportunity to test a film for authorship by means of a theory is *Desire*, directed by Frank Borzage and produced by Ernst Lubitsch. It is a perfect case because Borzage and Lubitsch are auteurs with strong visions which we can specify and compare in terms of a theory, so that a description of *Desire* in the same terms should give clear indication of which vision may be understood to underlie it. We will turn to the case after discussing the plausibility and the outline of an "auteur theory" with which we can make our case.

## II.

We may generalize our point that there is an underlying similarity to Lang's films despite their different patterns and implications of plot. What we primarily seek in an author's corpus is neither repetition of elements nor specific thematic implications.

Rather we seek in the works an attitude toward issues of people's relations to their own purposes and to their worlds, which attitude charges and informs each film's implicational logic and style. Such an attitude is the consequence of an authorial vision. An authorial vision is a particular set of relations constituting a view, on the one hand, of what people are like in their drives, plans, capacities and limitations, and, on the other, of what the world is like in its opportunities and restrictions, its nourishment of and resistance to the fulfillment of human hopes. An individual artwork raises, develops and resolves an issue concerning attitudes to particular interactions between people and their worlds which stand out as important under the vision.<sup>6</sup>

We should be clear about what is meant by "issues" and "attitudes," though there is nothing technical here, nothing incompatible with ordinary usage. If, as in Lang's vision, the world itself brings forth people's capacity for manic intensity, then how should we feel when a justifiable goal is contaminated by the mania arising when one reaches for it? That is the kind of question I have in mind when I talk about an "issue," and answers to such questions are provided by the very implicational structure of the whole film itself, the fused interrelationship of all its implications of meaning and value. The particular interactions in the film (inseparable from the images by which we know them) amount then to demonstrations of an "attitude" to such issues. What an image connotes, suggests and entails (as well as what both society in general and art-works in particular have said and thought about both images like that and what they represent) is *part of it* — for someone who has been to the movies before, who knows what needs to be known by way of general cultural orientation in order to make sense of them, and who is paying attention, to see the image is also to see what it means. So such contemplatable, attitude-bearing images (up to and including the image made up by the whole film) themselves are virtually "theses" suggesting what attitude might be taken to the film's issues when they appear in the real world. We might call them "aesthetic statements," remembering only that unlike ordinary statements they are not *asserted* but merely *presented* for contemplation.<sup>7</sup> Each "aesthetic statement" may well be different, in the different films of an auteur, but each is commensurate with the set of relations constituting the authorial vision. In fact, to see that it is commensurate is what we mean by knowing the auteur. It is not that we know the person as we know our friends, and it would make no difference to us if we found "that Shakespeare was really Bacon," but that we know the range of attitudes that can be in the films by the auteur.

So the individual film renders an attitude which is its own but is among those com-



patible with the attitude discernible in the authorial vision. If we get the point of the film (a matter up to our perspicacity and attentiveness) we understand its attitude because the particular issues developed by the totality of its style and action illustrate for us certain relations among our drives, wishes, hindrances, and the contexts which impede and support them. We grasp the facts of the surface — the plot, characterization, style, setting, elements of mise en scene, etc. — *in terms of* these relations, to which the facts refer. Thus we understand the film because it is *grounded*, like the vision itself, in a set of attitudes about issues of relations between people and their worlds.

We know such issues when we see them — they are the ones which count for us, too — and we know what attitudes towards them are like, though of course we need not agree with the attitude presented in the film before us. We know, moreover, how various actions and their outcomes could count towards expressing an attitude towards such issues. We can see, for example, how the quest for sensation in a rotten world might be felt to be comprehensible and even forgivable. But we can also see how what happens to Countess Told in *Dr. Mabuse* can only amount to an expression of a "statement", in the very film which asks us to sympathize with her, that there is a terrible drawback to her plan.

Films' attitudes, and the attitudes implicit in authorial visions, are rich and complex and different from each other, like the attitudes which a sensitive observer can take to life itself. But it is the substance of the "theory" of films and visions proposed here that the sequences and images, which is to say the parts of the whole of both cinematic surface and its projected world, are in fact organized, in the logic of aesthetic statements, so that two qualities become plain in any film which will count as "well-formed" for us, that is, which will bear contemplation, display an attitude to someone who knows how to contemplate or share attitudes at all. These two qualities are what we might call the "vision of the good" (or simply "the good") in the work, and the vision of what it is against which the good is seen to be set, which in turn we might call "the hindrance." The issue of feeling, of the interactions between people and their worlds, which underlies the work's particular sequences and allows them to image forth an aesthetic statement, is properly analyzed in terms of the struggle of the good both against its own weaknesses or "drawbacks" and against the hindrances brought against it from the depths of character or from the world outside. The presentation of that struggle amounts to a proposition in the logic of the imagination, a particular aesthetic statement as to the desirable vs. the fearful, their interplay, and its consequences. This assertion is itself one of the derivable shapes of the imagination and may be considered the

equivalent of the auteur's vision as it is manifested in the particular film.

The good and the hindrance are I think always clear. We know what we *must* value as desirable if we are to share a film's flow at all, and we know what is getting in its way, what the film sees the problem as. In trivial films that's *all* we know — much is said for getting the girl or killing the villain, much is made of the impediments and machinations, but little is made and much is ignored of what might be (and should be) said on the other side, on what a prudent person might fear by way of an after-life for the couple, or of what we all too often become as we do the killing. But living in the world as we do, as well as knowing that there are imaginable goods and hindrances to them, and as well as knowing that the goods are liable to such over-extensions and under-realizations as to amount to drawbacks assignable to the goods themselves, we know that what seem most purely hindrances have for their own part as good a side as goods have bad: we know, in effect, that as goods have drawbacks, so hindrances have what we might call "hedges," a set of qualities lending good possibilities to the apparent worst directions. A good film knows it too, as does a good vision informing a set of films.

In fact, the better a film or vision knows the relations of goods to hindrances, with all their qualifiers, then the richer, fuller, more evocative, more humane, in fact *better* the film or vision is. And this is simply because, aesthetic value being the capacity in an aesthetic object to induce aesthetic experience of some magnitude in an observer prepared to see what is going on in a design and the world it projects (see Beardsley, pp. 530ff.), and this aesthetic experience amounting in large part to the experience of one's mind turning over for observation and contemplation a set of relations among parts which in their human aspect are contemplable like that exactly because they suggest *all sides* of the attitude one can take to some set of aspects of the world to which one can respond at all (see Beardsley, pp. 527-30), why then it is obvious that the work which *has in its own qualities* just that set of attitudes which plays up both sides, in all their strength and weakness, of the ways we can feel about some unifying set of human issues, must be the work best suited to the aesthetic experience of contemplating it. So not only does the theory presented here let us name visions, it lets us name them in the way we care most about, the way that will encourage us to judge among them and the films which manifest them. And such a judgment must be implicit at least in any specification of an auteur's vision — though by the time one has got through spelling out the richness of a vision, often its value is so obvious as to go without saying, to be simply what it was that was being proved by the analysis itself.

To summarize, then: to know a film or

vision under an auteur theory is to perceive that it organizes a set of issues in terms of a set of implications about what, in the particular metaphoric world of the work or vision in question, is desirable and undesirable in human experience, playing off what is wanted and feared against renditions of what happens or is fantasized in such a way as to induce audiences to contemplate the nature of things, as seen under just this organization, and to share for the duration of that contemplation the attitude on balance rendered, whether an attitude of delight in possibilities, anguish at fate, or any other plausible, contemplable mixture. One sees a film in its own terms, and hence one sees and thinks about the world in those terms through the film which suggests them. To know the film is to know what those terms are. And as well as knowing the author as the putative imagination which can have organized the film in those terms, we can, using the theory, even hypothesize whether a given film should be seen as belonging in the canon of a particular auteur or not, which is a sort of side effect of the theory not possible to that mere "policy" which does infer visions from regularities of elements but can never stop to ask whether or not to include some new, questionable, balance of elements in what it seeks to regularize.

### III.

As a way of making the theory outlined above intelligible, let us turn to *Desire*, both to explicate the theory and to prove its worth in establishing disputable attribution by seeing how its aesthetic statement marches with the visions of the two strong auteurs who had a hand in its production, Borzage and Lubitsch. The film's presentational surface is full of "Lubitsch touches" of cleverness, elegance, surprise, and comedy. The pan, from the door of his store to the peephole from which Duval the jeweler watches his customers, deflates the snooty elegance of the shop. The pantomime conversation behind glass doors (it echoes *Trouble in Paradise*) between Carlos, Madeline's "uncle," and Tom Bradley, American rube, salesman of Bronson 8's and Madeline's savior, distances us a bit from the comic complications we know we will savor. The constant routines involving cigarettes render the fun and play of human interaction. And there is a wonderful insouciance to such lines as Tom's when, having kicked Carlos's gun out of his hand and into a serving dish, he instructs the cook to "Take this to the kitchen and disarm the fricassee."

The lightness of touch here and in many other scenes is distinctly Lubitsch-like. But there are scenes which Lubitsch would have played differently. For instance, Tom reports how he has slapped and spanked Madeline for having been a thief. While he tells it, she seems thoroughly to approve and to adore him for the chastisement.



There is a certain almost aberrant coarseness to Borzage — I think of Chico's holding Nana over the open sewer and laughing at her terror in *Seventh Heaven*, or of Gilly Johnson, in *Moonrise*, acting the grand Southern lady in order to reduce the sexual tension which she intends to denature but also to relish. Lubitsch would not, I think, indulge himself in a *frisson* about the possibility of rape. Borzage's romanticism is partly a sexism which Lubitsch escapes.

His touch of coarseness might distinguish Borzage and Lubitsch and show why Lubitsch belongs in the Pantheon and Borzage on the steps of the temple; but we would not wish to define Borzage merely through his deficiencies. Nor do we have to. The distancing Lubitsch-like touches are only in the beginning of *Desire* the dominating tonal devices. After the beginning, the film emphasizes a much more intimate matter, the achievement of a relationship between Madeline and Tom which will redeem Madeline from the nastiness of Carlos, Olga, and her previous life. As the film develops, individuality becomes transcendent through the commitment of love — and with that transcendence the characters are empowered to act in the world in a conventionally moral way.

The feeling attending conventional moral action, however, is not merely conventional. Olga argues that Madeline could never love Tom because she could never flee the law or escape her past. But the argument is denied in the attitude the film projects. The sincerity of Madeline's appeal to Duval, of her assurance that "I have changed my life" as she returns the stolen pearls and asks that he not prosecute, constitutes the substance and proof of escaping one's past, of being free from domination by mere circumstance. In Borzage, the conventional is made luminous with selfhood. Madeline's assurance to Duval renders the same rich mixture of tones as those which, in *Moonrise*, attach to the scene when Danny comes back to his friend Sheriff Clem who will arrest him, to his hound-friend Daisy Belle who has tracked him down, to his black friend Moe who approves his surrender, and to his girl friend Gilly with whom he walks off toward prison in the sunrise. One accepts one's accountability and one is in some sense imprisoned — yet at the same time one can achieve a transfiguration which makes the submission inconsequential. In *Three Comrades* the characters walk off together at the end although two of them have died and are shades.

In the phrase of the Boss, then, in Sturges's *The Great McGinty*, the Borzage characters are "at the mercy" — but then that is where the love is. It would not fit Lubitsch's delicately ironic respect for his characters' autonomy to emphasize as Borzage does the adoration with which Madeline looks at Tom over breakfast, or at the dinner table while he commiserates

with her for her red hands where he has slapped her. And Lubitsch would certainly never have portrayed as does Borzage the way Madeline and Tom come together to discover their love. Tom is an utterly American rube to Madeline's totally decadent sophisticate as he tells her about Detroit, smoke, and work. But Madeline says, as she relishes his attitude, that "The Spanish moon is very becoming to you; I never saw you in this light before." As they kiss we see first over her shoulder to him, and then in a high shot past him to her, in a delirious rendition of sexuality of a sort one never finds in Lubitsch.

But this is where Borzage *lives*. One sees it very clearly in a contrast with Murnau. Murnau directs Janet Gaynor, reconciled with her husband in *Sunrise*, as playful, sweet, and winning but hardly as sexual. But in *Seventh Heaven* Borzage directs her, in the role of Diane, as a very paradigm of open sexuality. When Diane and Chico admit they love each other, she leans against him, kisses his ear and neck, and sags against him (while again we see it in a sudden high shot) in a sexual abandon like Madeline's in Tom's arms. It is almost embarrassing, not only in its explicit sexuality but in the way sex is (as so seldom in the movies) perfectly attuned to strong feelings of mutuality. In contrast, when Murnau does treat open sexuality in *Sunrise* it is by having the Woman from the City bite the husband on the neck like Nosferatu.

Borzage makes it plain that the people who experience the kisses he shows are never the same again. No matter how many Lubitsch-like touches there are in *Desire*, the way Tom and Madeline look at each other later reminds us that their kiss was what counted. And we must remember that those kisses are the kind of thing a director has literally in his control. There is no disputing their evidence; they render the quality of intimate intensity which is the central aspect of Borzage's image of the good.

The achievement of that quality is accomplished again and again through camera placement. We saw how in *Desire* and in *Seventh Heaven* sudden surprising high shots attended the key kisses. In *Moonrise*, as Danny and Gilly begin to dance together in the ruins of the Blackwater mansion, the camera swoops back and up to bring into the foreground a cobwebbed chandelier while the couple dance in the background. The camera comes down and toward the couple as they move toward a tattered harp. Finally they come to rest, in silhouette and close two-shot, in a curtained window, saying "It's never been like this before" and kissing.

This is another magic Borzage moment. It makes clear how in one sense the shape of his imagination is visual — it can be expressed as "from far away to close two-shot." In *Three Comrades* a sudden high shot introduces the ending sequence. The opening theme from *Tristan* begins as, in

the high shot, Pat gets out of bed to stagger to the window to die. Erich sees from her below, again in long shot, as she pirouettes and collapses. And then he rushes upstairs to her to share, in close two-shot and to the accompaniment of the *Liebestod*, the ecstatic moments of her death.<sup>8</sup>

In *History is Made at Night*, after the ship has struck the iceberg we enter a sequence with a long shot of the fog-shrouded ship, a track in towards it, a dissolve to Paul and Irene sitting on a companionway in the mist, and finally a cut to the close two-shot in which, while strange shrieks and moans surround them (they remind me of the sounds in *Red Desert*), they speak of their early lives. They enrich their experience of each other, and fill their minds with all that matters to them at the moment despite their plight — with talk of Irene's braces and Paul's eyes, of her young shyness and his truancy. Again it is a transfiguration, within an imprisonment which the transfiguration makes inconsequential.

Borzage gives the same treatment, a little earlier in the film, to a sequence beginning in a street scene; he then pans to the carriage and horses in which Paul and Irene are riding, then cuts inside to where Irene rests her head on Paul's shoulder, and finally dissolves again to that close two-shot, in which they kiss: "Oh," says Irene. They kiss again, and "Oh again;" and they kiss again "And Oh forever." Borzage's style presents his vision and valuation of the good in human relations most directly in shots like these, which render the symbolic shared experiences and transcendental attitudes of his characters in very direct visual images. The characters form a world of their own, in the intimacy of these two-shots, which makes everything else irrelevant until, like Paul and Irene, Gilly and Danny, they have to bring the lesson of those moments into the moral dawn again.

But one might still argue that *Desire* is a film by Lubitsch despite the Borzagian elements, unless one could claim that it was incommensurate with Lubitsch's vision as well as commensurate with Borzage's. For instance, *Desire* is clearly different from *Trouble in Paradise* in that its jewel thieves are not sophisticates who reject bourgeois security but immoral outcasts who should be caught if they do not reform and who are transfigured if they do. But one might argue for Lubitsch's authorship by pointing out that *Desire* is a later film. Perhaps we might see it as a film on the road to *Ninotchka* and *The Shop Around the Corner*. As in *Ninotchka*, after all, a woman is brought to change her ways by the force of a man's love, and moves toward salvation from a maladaptive commitment in which she was imprisoned. But the difference in visions of the good in the two films outweighs the similarity in plot. *Ninotchka* is truly committed to her Soviet ideology and morals (silly as the troika of Iranoff, Buljanoff and Kopalski make them seem), and the love-life she will lead with Leon is clearly a



bittersweet acceptance of the pressure of laughter and civility. Madeline on the other hand, learns that what she thought she could only dream of is possible after all.

Similarly, Leon redeems Ninotchka with his sophistication as Tom redeems Madeline with his innocent directness. But Leon changes too, away from what he was like with Swana and towards what Ninotchka is like herself. Tom on the other hand does not change at all. He is a silly rube like Ninotchka, but rubishness in Borzage needs no qualifying. The good in *Desire* is ecstatic American directness as against European sophistication, but in *Ninotchka* it is a very European mixture of values by which one settles from extremes into laughing sense. While it might seem as if *Ninotchka* is more Borzagian than *Trouble in Paradise*, the same relations among attitudes hold for Lubitsch under the more softened conventions as under the brighter ones of a decade earlier.

But the Garbo contribution to *Ninotchka* might be said to obscure a comparison with *Desire*. *The Shop Around the Corner* might support a better argument that *Desire* is a Lubitsch film half-way to the forties. Indeed Kralik has the same sort of saving effect as Tom, when he helps Klara get over her snobbishness about culture and jobs. But Tom is an unequivocally romantic hero, a wondrous lover, disguised as a car salesman, who rises in his pride. Kralik on the other hand is a mixed character who continues to the end a quality of delightfully mercenary and seedy clerkishness which is just what Klara learns to appreciate. Similarly, Klara is mistaken in her aims like Ninotchka, but at the same time she is appealing in those aims and corrigible for her mistakes in pursuing them without moderation. Madeline, however, is not a partly approvable prisoner of her own bad goals, but a prisoner absolute, whether as a willing vamp or when she is in despair to learn of an alternative which she thinks cannot be hers. The underlying relation between people and their worlds in Lubitsch is one in which errors of exaggeration are corrected by laughter and the middle way. But in *Desire* the miserable sophisticate longs for reclamation by love, and achieves it.

The contrast between these relations illustrates the truth of Northrop Frye's remark that there is a difference which is more than a distinction between comic romance and romantic comedy.<sup>9</sup> Borzage's romances are often funny, but they turn on the emergence of force in a hero who rescues someone. They approve the feelings of release and command which attend the victory of our simplest plans over the apparently constraining qualifications and complexities with which the world surrounds us — and in the presence of which we feel like naive rubes. Lubitsch's comedies are often romantic, but they approve the feelings of satisfied awareness which go with the realization that indeed

there are no romantic simplicities to which we could leap, but rather that the world as it is, in all its mixedness and irony, is still the best source of satisfaction.

The interactions between people and their worlds which Lubitsch presents thus illustrate his image of value, as Borzage's presented interactions illustrate his. Gaston is tempted to simplify his life and goals, by becoming the rich husband of Mme Colet. Ninotchka tries to cling to an absolutist view. Kralik and Klara think to leap past the shop they work in to a world of poetry and rhetorical bliss. Gilda, in *Design for Living*, thinks to be more secure with Max than with her merry wastrals. Lady Windermere thinks to give up all for love. Danilo, in *The Merry Widow*, thinks to remain free and ecstatic with his Maxim's girls. But Danilo's satisfactory wedding in a prison can stand for the retreat to the mixed, funny, middle life of all these comedies. Where Borzage's romances assert the ecstasy of forceful simplicity, Lubitsch's comedies assert the graceful irony of acceptance. The conclusion is plain: *Desire* is by Borzage, not by Lubitsch.

We can distinguish Borzage from Lubitsch, then, largely through comparison of their visions of the good. But our goal was to specify Borzage rather than merely distinguish him. Our theory says that any imagination must have an attitude towards what it sees as the hindrances to the image of the good towards which it works. And Borzage has a very clear image of what acts as hindrance to his lovers' transcendence. In Borzage the universe is not just composed of those who have not reached the lovers' ecstasy, but also of positive oppressors. The analysis of the interplay between visions of the good and the bad, the auteur theory says, is the goal of the shaping imagination. As we contrasted Borzage's image of the good with Lubitsch's because it is similar but discriminable, so we can contrast Borzage's image of the bad with another's to show that auteur analysis is indeed governed by theory and not merely by the policy to discover continuities.

In many ways the characteristic couple of Nicholas Ray, the bearers of his vision of the good like Bowie and Keechie of *They Live By Night* or Tom and Vicki of *Party Girl* or Walt and Naomi of *Wind Across the Everglades*, is like a Borzage couple, though Ray is more coltish and exuberant in his image than Borzage who is more monolithically sexual: Ink and Asiak play pushing games like children in *The Savage Innocents*, and Judy and Jim romp about in fine young fettle in *Rebel Without A Cause*.

But more importantly for defining the differences in vision, for Ray the central couple is surrounded by *paired opponents*, by gangsters on the one hand and nasty bourgeois respectables on the other. Cottonmouth's wild gang in *Wild Across the Everglades* is opposed by the cold real estate promoters. Rico's gang in *Party Girl* is opposed to the bourgeois lawyers of

Chicago. Chicamaw and T-Dub of *They Live By Night* are opposed to all the others who are "thieves like us" but won't admit it. The Dancin' Kid's gang in *Johnny Guitar* is opposed to Emma Small's horrible townsfolk. Buzz and his gang are opposed to the parental generation in *Rebel Without a Cause*. And the same structure holds for *Bigger Than Life*, *Knock on Any Door*, *The True Story of Jesse James*, and *On Dangerous Ground*, and it is only in *The Savage Innocents*, an overt fantasy, that we find the respectable exploiters like the Troupers and other white people without the parallel gangsters on the other side.

These paired opponents prove alternatives for the central couple, the gangsters by and large the more sympathetic, but the point always for the couple to try to escape from them and their death-trip into a kind of domesticity, a freedom by oneself, which will escape the emptiness of the cold ones too. So Ray always implies a kinship with the gangster motive, which will however take one too far and which one has to become a couple to avoid without on the other hand sliding into coldness, acceptance, uncertainty and death.

The Borzage imagination sees the lovers not surrounded by these pairs, but rather sees them as imprisoned in a world of uniform hostility out of which one must escape as a couple. Rather than half admiring those whose extreme must be avoided, Borzage entirely despises the evil and pressing controllers of the lovers who would reduce them to the social structure, would grind them down. So for Diane there are Nana and Brissac while for Chico there is the war machine itself and even his friend Gobin the street-washer, who is entirely too accepting of authority — and whose hoses bear an uncanny resemblance to the flamethrower which blinds Chico. So for Madeline there is Carlos and for Tom there is the embarrassment, the sense of reduced possibilities, of being a postman's child. So for Irene there is Bruce her millionaire husband while for Paul there is the embarrassment of being a head-waiter, though indeed the best in the world. And for Danny Hawkins the hillbilly there is the oppression of Jerry Sykes the banker's son, while for Gilly the country girl there is the insidious pressure to rise in class and not run with the likes of Danny at all.

The oppressors are a nasty lot: Carlos is an evil man, to be feared and somehow strangely perverse. Nana is evil incarnate and overblown. Bruce combines class hauteur with simple obsession in the jealousy which sends Irene to Paul. And Jerry Sykes taunts Danny with his father's execution to earn himself a largely justified murder — which Sheriff Clem understands so well that he can assure Gilly that Danny will have most of his life before him when he gets out of jail. So while some of the oppressors self-destruct like Bruce and Jerry, it is clear in Borzage not only how the couple transcend their pressures through



the sort of fidelity which saves Diane from Brissac, but also how it is perfectly possible for a person not to resist those pressures. In *History is Made at Night*, for instance, the commodore, knowing from the water temperature that they are in iceberg waters, nonetheless obeys shipowner Bruce's radioed commands for more speed. These commands are literally intended to get Irene and Paul killed, but the commodore cannot resist them. His submission is the alternative to the lovers' independence, what has brought them back to France in the service of love and duty instead of letting them flee to Tahiti in fear. And we observe through the commodore how it is possible that an apparently obsequious head-waiter actually may be a boss in a way that it is quite likely that an apparently high official may not be.

The commodore's catatonia, his willingness to do what he is ordered and his emotional dissociation from his own acts, is a Borzage image of what the world is like when not suffused by the directionality of love. And it informs the whole film, the feeling of a structure of possibility which the lovers must transcend. It is clear how this contrasts with Ray, for whom the point is not to go too far toward a craziness which is in part explicable as a natural reaction against the class system as it really is, while for Borzage the point is to escape from the deadness all around in the only way possible, by the kind of lovely transcendence which is his image of the good and which replaces for the lovers the class system altogether.

We can see from this contrast how the Borzage image of the hindrance is and must be as explicit as his image of the good. One can only really understand a quality if one understands thoroughly in what senses it is not its alternatives. The auteur theory must specify the discovery of the full shape of the imagination, its image of the hindrance as well as its image of the good. When we have a clear picture of the images of someone like Borzage, how the commodore's catatonia or Gobin's saluting Brissac or Irene's being raved at by Bruce or Danny's being tormented by Jerry and taking it are all varieties of deadness of spirit imposed by a world of class dominance and an associated psychological mania, and how this differs from Ray's picture of a polar evil, an explosion into madness like that of the red exploding star of the planetarium in *Rebel Without a Cause* or on the other hand the emptiness and ineffectualness of the school teachers of *Bigger Than Life*, then we can describe their imaginations very directly. We can say that Ray's picture of the good lies between extremes, which is to say that we can see him as a moralist cautioning against the dangers of what he sees as a quite natural kind of satisfaction to approve. And we can say that Borzage's picture of the good exactly is the extreme, the all-consuming power which opposes directly that other hindering extreme of deadness, which Ray tells us to watch out

for but about which Borzage raises no doubts whatever.

We have come to rather precise discrimination among different authorial visions under our theory, rather than having been impressionistic, in reporting on similarities or differences which strike us as important. It is this precision, this sense of something to be learned by careful study, of which I think anti-auteurists have felt the lack in studies under an auteur policy, which lack has led them to seek alternatives better related, they thought, to solid knowledge of the nature of things. One can sympathize, but one can realize too that solid knowledge is in no field of serious inquiry always easy to come by or obvious on its face. But the solid comparisons under a simple yet defensible set of principled terms, such as our theory provides, are extendable both into specific analysis of individual films and into illuminating and forceful comparisons among auteurs. It is the kind of work which the auteur theory is both fully theoretically justified in seeking and perhaps uniquely capable of providing. As a theory of the imagination, the auteur theory demands that one discover the total shape of imaginative vision in its goods and hindrances, its drawbacks and hedges, rather than settle easily into any one of the component images, even such striking ones as Borzage kisses.

#### Notes

1 Andrew Sarris, in an interview in *Film Heritage*, 8 (Summer 1973), 30, and in "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1970" in *The Primal Screen* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), pp. 55, 58.

2 "Whether you are committed to Ray, Nicholas, or Ray, Satyajit, you have to see all their work before you can be authoritative on any one of their films." Andrew Sarris, "The Auteur Theory and the Perils of Pauline," *Film Quarterly*, 16 (Summer 1963), pp. 26-33, 28.

3 Andrew Sarris quotes himself using this phrase in "Note on the Auteur Theory in 1962" in "Auteurism is Alive and Well," *Film Quarterly*, 28 (Fall 1974), p. 63.

4 For the grounding of the theory presented here in philosophical aesthetics, see my "Human Experience and the Work Itself: A Review of Beardsley's *Aesthetics for Film Critics*," *Journal of the University Film Association*, XXIX (Winter 1977), pp. 25-32. Semiologists will differ with the very starting-point of Beardsley's (and my) case, which is that an art object appears as a presentation, a phenomenally objective part of our perceptual fields, knowable to us as different from ourselves and from those social associations which we can observe as going with it, and describable in terms which relate to it not to us. But for the semiologist there is no knowing, per-

ceiving subject to see what is going on; there is only the concrete individual transformed into the subject by ideology (as for Althusser), or constituted in the Symbolic by language itself (for Lacan or indeed Saussure). In short, our consciousness is determined by our social being, as Marx most basically has it. But Beardsley's assumption system make sense to me, and is supported in a scientific way by the picture of cognitive functioning suggested both in general by Jacques Monod in *Chance and Necessity*, which picture is cited approvingly by Chomsky himself, and in particular by such cognitive psychologists as Ulrich Neisser. This is not the place to attack this crucial issue head on, but such an attack is in the works. In short, if you do not believe that we can look at a film, see it and the qualities which emerge from the perceptual conditions of our viewing it, and talk about it rather than about ourselves, you are not going to believe my argument here.

5 Authorship, I take it, means responsibility for the work in its aesthetic aspect, rather than credit for the control of all or some major part of its production. Issues about authorship are settled by analysis of the shaping imagination responsible for a work's import, not by appeal to an unrecoverable historical record. Failure to grasp this distinction is what sent Graham Petrie astray in "Alternatives to Auteurs," *Film Quarterly* 26 (Spring 1973), pp. 27-35.

6 The point is not restricted to realistic or even to representational works. Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Leger's *Ballet Mécanique*, even "structuralist" works like Paul Sharits's *Ray Gun Virus*, all refer to such interactions, though by different means for imitation of life. *Ballet Mécanique*, for instance, develops an attitude of approval of the mechanical, by moving from conventional treatment of human habitation of space and nature to a presentation of human processes intimately and pleasingly linked with what we are likely to think to be anti-human, merely mechanical.

7 That is, we do not properly try to decide if they are true or false, as we do with ordinarily asserted statements. See Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), pp. 419-37, esp. pp. 422-23.

8 John Belton, "Souls Made Great by Love and Adversity: Frank Borzage," *Monogram*, no. 4 (1972), pp. 20-23, treats this scene, like all of Borzage, interestingly but somewhat differently from the interpretation suggested here.

9 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 177.



# Intentionality, Authorship, and Film Criticism

by Leland Poague

## I.

It is probably mistaken to speak of "the discipline of film criticism." Quite clearly there are several such disciplines and a good deal of theoretical confusion results from the fact that the differences among them are seldom fully acknowledged. This confusion is most serious in those cases where general differences in critical purpose are argued at the more specific level of critical categories. The ongoing debate over auteurism is a good case in point.

The category has fallen into disrepute, as I read the situation, not because of any inherent or internal weakness but because particular critics have come to disagree with the critical purpose generally served by auteurism. Auteur criticism, that is, concerns itself primarily (though not exclusively) with the significance that specific texts might be said to have for contemporary viewers. Why watch *The Big Sleep* now? To be sure, the methodology for determining significance is intertextual and generic in focus. One proceeds by setting one Hawks film, say, next to another in order to discern their similarities. But it is an unstated though implicit premise of auteur theory that those traits held in common by the films of a given director are likely to be exactly those traits which the most rigorously intrinsic criticism would choose to focus on in discussing those films (I discuss the logic underlying this premise in the Spring 1978 issue of *Literature/Film Quarterly*).<sup>1</sup> Hence the fact that auteur studies have typically been constituted as collections of essays on specific films rather than as biographies using films as a source

of evidence. Put another way, auteurism in practice is a textually centered theory of criticism the purpose of which is generally to demonstrate the kind of life that a film text might have in the community of viewers, past, present, and future.

Much post-structuralist criticism, on the other hand, for all of the attention it devotes to systemeticity and textuality, is *not* textually centered in purpose. The goal of most "materialist" critics is to establish the relationship between films on the one hand and the structures of society on the other. The premise is that society "causes" films, and conversely, that films "cause" society; and the hope, at least implicitly, is that discovering exactly how this is true will enable us to re-cast society by changing the films that we make and see. Put another way, the goal of materialist film criticism is "supra-textual." If an individual film comes under analysis it is *not* for the sake of the text itself but to illustrate some larger concept — the symptoms or effects of bourgeois style, say, or the methodology of deconstructive criticism, etc., etc. Hence the fact that materialist film criticism has little patience with textual analysis per se; and hence as well the fact that materialist film criticism finds little use for the auteurist paradigm. It is not that auteurism does not do the job but that the job it does or helps to do is irrelevant or uninteresting to the task of criticism as materialist film critics conceive it.

My own point of view is resolutely New Critical and auteurist — and for a variety of reasons, most of which I will only refer to in passing if at all. But I should make it clear that I find the structuralist/materialist concept of the purpose of criticism

inadequate. I do not doubt, for example, that films are reflective of and in part are determined by genetic circumstances. *It Happened One Night*, for instance, is clearly a depression era Hollywood film (e.g., the hungry boy on the bus; the hobos that Gable waves to while waiting at a railroad crossing). And critics whose primary interest is to resurrect the social context of the early 1930s — or even the more general context of "bourgeois ideology" (itself an historical category) — are perfectly entitled to cite or refer to the film in the course of their work. But doing so amounts to film criticism, in my view, if and only if the statements that are made regarding *It Happened One Night* are of some help in describing the intrinsic qualities of the film itself, which is not the same thing as explaining its historical or ideological genesis. To explain why *It Happened One Night* was made within a particular culture at a certain point in history tells us next to nothing of the significance that the film might bear for audiences (rather than social historians) in the future, audiences whose members are likely to know even less about the specifics of life in the 1930s than we do. Put another way: if genetic knowledge *were* crucial or necessary to the comprehension or appreciation of works of art, how do we account for our ability to understand the vast majority of the art works we come into contact with when in most cases our knowledge of genetic circumstances (social, authorial, etc.) is only of the most general sort and is likely to be derived, in fact, almost exclusively from our experience of other art works? (Of course, one could argue that most people do *not* understand or appreciate works of



# Intentionality, Authorship, and Film Criticism

art at all — but then the notion that art in some sense “causes” society becomes suspect: people will do what they will with films and no investigation of the films themselves is likely to explain their behavior.)

None of which is likely to convince the members of the *Screen* editorial board of the philosophical errors of their way. Such is not particularly my purpose here. Rather, I am concerned, however briefly, with one specific aspect of the auteurist debate — the problem of intentionality — as that problem is raised by recent critics of auteurism and authorship. I hope to show that auteurism (of a sort) can withstand both intentionalist and anti-intentionalist objections. This lengthy prologue is necessary, however, so as to “place” my own remarks. In defending auteurism I accept the general view of criticism which I take it to imply. My argument proper, however, will be addressed to a more specific problem of critical vocabulary and usage.

## II.

Much of the criticism of auteur theory keys on the matter of authorial intention: whether it is discoverable or attributable; whether it is conscious or unconscious; whether it ought to be a criterion of criticism or not. Anti-auteurists will not all provide the same answers to these questions (as I will show) but all assume that auteur criticism depends upon intentionality for its legitimacy.

## II.A.

The issue of attributability is in many respects the most complicated of the objections to auteur criticism for asking questions which are difficult if not impossible to answer, particularly if they are answered, as they are asked, in empirical terms. Thus someone like Graham Petrie might contest the proposition that “the final scene of *The Grapes of Wrath* expresses the world view of John Ford” on the empirical ground that Zanuck proposed (and shot?) the scene.<sup>2</sup> The objection is less conclusive than it might seem. There is nothing inherent in the fact of Zanuck’s collaboration which prevents the attribution of expressivity to Ford. He was free to protest the inclusion of the scene. And it is arguable

that Ma Joad’s final speech fits perfectly into the structure of the film, as if Zanuck, having grasped the film’s logic, were merely filling out Ford’s thematic design. Nevertheless, some measure of attributability is clearly necessary for auteurism to function. Thus, even if the empirical issue is less clear cut than it might seem at first, we must explore it further.

I have already remarked, in Section I, that knowledge of genetic (as opposed to aesthetic) circumstances *cannot* be *necessary* to the interpretation of aesthetic texts. We know next to nothing of the particular genetic circumstances which attend upon the creation of most works and yet we have little difficulty discussing their qualities or their values. This is clearly the case with anonymous authors like Homer and the Pearl Poet; and will become increasingly the case in film criticism as the last of the pioneers die off. Nevertheless, *some* knowledge of genetic circumstances can be helpful — and this is the auteurist claim. The *kind* of knowledge necessary to auteurism, however, has very little to do with intention, and the data to confirm attribution derives primarily from the text itself.

We have already remarked upon the logic of auteurism; auteur criticism operates on the hypothesis that the qualities shared by the films of a given director are likely to be precisely those qualities which a rigorously intrinsic reading of those films would discover. The auteurist method is thus continually to test its own validity (a strength, in my view, rather than a weakness). It begins with a probable hypothesis, that the director of record, as evidenced in the screen credits, was indeed the efficient cause of the text at hand; and it concludes with a determination of the degree to which the auteurist paradigm has indeed been useful. In cases where the directorial paradigm teaches us next to nothing about the text, we doubt the initial guess and seek out another probable paradigm (of screenwriter, actor, producer, studio, etc). In cases where it teaches us a great deal, however, we can reasonably enough take this to confirm the initial attribution. As far as interpretation is concerned, this sort of confirmation is all that is required. It is only in cases where reputations are at stake or being argued that more definitive evidence is necessary.

In most cases, however, such evidence is almost impossible to come by. How are we to know, from scene to scene, which member of a production team exercised the authorial function? In most cases we can never know for sure. The best guess, hardly inconsistent with an historical approach, is the director. And even in cases where the attribution is eventually discounted, the

directorial guess still has the advantage of foregrounding the text itself. To see a John Wayne film as a “John Wayne film” is generally to attend to Wayne and the nuances of his persona and performance: we can see Wayne. But we can only see a director by implication. To look for the director in a film is to look at the whole film because there is no place else to look. The empiricist objection to auteurism is not an argument over critical method, then, but over the goal of criticism. If the end of criticism is value judgments, judgments of authorial worth rather than of the work itself, then auteurism will not do the job with the finality and certainty desired by those who pronounce value judgments. If the goal of criticism is description and interpretation of the work and it’s qualities, however, auteurism is completely adequate (though not absolutely necessary) to the task.

## II.B.

A second frequent objection to auteurism has to do with intention and consciousness — on the premise that conscious intention on the director’s part must pre-exist auteuristic discussion of his works and of the values they celebrate. As Edward Buscombe put it in *Screen*: “The themes of transferred guilt in Hitchcock, of home, and the desert/garden antithesis in Ford,...are almost entirely unconscious, making it inappropriate to speak, as so much auteur criticism does, about a director’s world view.”<sup>3</sup> It takes little effort to demonstrate the flaw in this argument.

Clearly, when one screens *Psycho* (under ordinary circumstances) there is no question that Hitchcock is not present and is not presently intending the film. Any intentions implied by or evidenced in the film could only have existed during production. The intentionalist argument is thus a special case of the genetic argument. Both suffer from the same insufficiency. That is, if it is difficult to know with certainty who fulfilled the authorial function at any point in time, how much more difficult will it be to determine that author’s state of mind (conscious or unconscious) during production? Far and away the best evidence we have of authorial intention is the text itself; and even that evidence is indirect and inconclusive. Texts may “evidence” intention. They may have been “intended.” But they are not “intentions.” They are texts. To discuss intention is therefore to discuss an implication of the work, one of many such implications, and not the work itself. Thus, even when someone like Hitchcock apparently reveals conscious intentions to interviewers, such revelations are of little consequence to criticism, which is concerned with works and texts and not with



the circumstances which gave birth to them. That is, we are not concerned with what Hitchcock did in 1959 but what we do now (in 1979) when we watch and think about *Psycho*. To the extent that *Psycho* realizes Hitchcock's intentions, to talk about *Psycho* is to talk about intention to the degree that it is relevant. To talk about intentions not evidenced in or by the text is not to talk about the text but about authorial psychology — which may be interesting but is not film criticism.

## I.C.

A third objection to auteurism, the last I will deal with here, might be termed the Roland Barthes objection, though it can be seen clearly enough in the film scholarship of Peter Wollen and Paul Willemen.<sup>4</sup> The first two objections to auteur criticism, the Petrie and Buscombe objections, assume that knowledge of intention is necessary but problematic: if we ever could be certain about directorial intention, then auteurism would indeed be a valid philosophy of criticism. The Barthes objection argues just the contrary. According to Barthes, criticism has no trouble discerning authorial intention. The problem is that criticism substitutes intention for the text:

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases; society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained' — victory to the critic.<sup>5</sup>

I think it can be demonstrated (as I hope to demonstrate elsewhere) that Barthes drastically overestimates the power of criticism and underestimates or misrepresents the power and status of aesthetic objects: the effects of criticism, in my experience, is exactly the reverse of that foreseen by Barthes, in that genuine criticism brings texts alive for readers by generating frameworks of pertinence. One can have little sense of a signifier without perceiving a signified. The only people who suffer from good criticism are other critics who may wish that they had said it first. Nevertheless, the Barthes objection to authorship is interesting for the fact that it reinforces two points which I would make: 1) that arguments based primarily on intention are illegitimate and reduce works of art by limiting their significance to the private context of authorial psychology; and 2) that the proper and only necessary context for interpretation is the linguistic or

semiotic context.

To agree with Barthes on these two points is not to call for the death of the author. I argue just the contrary. Auteurism does not depend upon intention and never really has. Intentionality language can be very easily translated out of most auteurist criticism without destroying the logic or validity of its results. Accordingly, we can perfectly well continue to employ the auteurist paradigm as long as our goal is to interpret the text and to describe its particular use of linguistic and aesthetic conventions. The knowledge necessary to doing so, furthermore, is not knowledge of genetic circumstances primarily but of aesthetic circumstances. That is, we must know the language and conventions of reading appropriate to a given text, which knowledge we acquire, as I have argued elsewhere, primarily through previous contact with literary or aesthetic objects, not through historical or biographical research.<sup>6</sup> The auteurist paradigm works on this principle: every Hawks film we see teaches us how to see succeeding Hawks films for teaching us the language of the Hawksian cinema. Auteurism cannot guarantee in specific instances that there is such a language to discover — so auteurism cannot claim to be equally useful in every case. But such a discovery is the best evidence we can have of authorial causality and it is certainly evidence enough to warrant a continued allegiance to the general methods and goals of auteur criticism.

## III.

It is worth remarking, in closing, that I lay no special claim to the logic of the argument here presented. The intentionality debate has a long history in literary studies and aesthetics. I agree with Barthes and Wollen that intentionalist arguments do violence to the life of the text — but Monroe Beardsley and W.K. Wimsatt (whom I have followed as best I could) made that point in 1946.<sup>7</sup> Thus there is nothing particularly or exclusively "modern" in the anti-intentionalist position. Indeed, one of the first auteur studies undertaken in English, Robin Wood's *Hitchcock's Films*, is quite clearly in the Beardsley/Wimsatt tradition for insisting that Hitchcock's films are to be read without regard for Hitchcock's reported intentions. The debate goes on, however, for the very reason that aesthetic texts lead multiple lives, i.e., people can use aesthetic objects in a variety of ways, as historical evidence, as biographical evidence, as works of art. What a text "is" thus depends upon the use that is made of it, even in cases where such uses seem completely inap-

propriate to the qualities of the text at hand. Ultimately, then, the geneticism debate (and the auteur controversy as a localized version of it) cannot be settled apart from the larger question of critical objectives. The best I can hope to show here is not that the goal of criticism as I practice it is superior to that proposed by materialist film critics (though I clearly believe it is) but rather that a version of auteurism is completely consistent with the textually centered variety of film criticism I practice. In so doing I believe I have cleared up some confusions. The fewer of those the better.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See "The Problem of Film Genre: A Mentalistic Approach," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 6, No. 2 (1978), 152-161; see also the Preface and Conclusion to *The Cinema of Ernst Lubitsch: The Hollywood Films* (South Brunswick and New York: A.S. Barnes, 1978).

<sup>2</sup>Graham Petrie, "Alternatives to Auteurs," *Film Quarterly*, 26, No. 3 (1973), 27-35. Petrie doesn't use Ford as his example (he uses Welles) but the objection is typical of his approach. My information on *The Grapes of Wrath* comes from Mel Gussow, *Don't Say Yes Until I Finish Talking: A Biography of Darryl F. Zanuck* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971).

<sup>3</sup>Edward Buscombe, "Ideas of Authorship," *Screen*, 14, No. 3 (1973), p. 83.

<sup>4</sup>See Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, 3rd Ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972); and Paul Willemen, "Notes on Subjectivity: On Reading Edward Branigan's 'Subjectivity Under Siege'," *Screen*, 19, No. 1 (1978), 41-69.

<sup>5</sup>Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 147.

<sup>6</sup>See "The Problem of Film Genre."

<sup>7</sup>Monroe C. Beardsley and W.K. Wimsatt, Jr., "The Intentional Fallacy," *Sewanee Review*, 54 (1946); rpt. in W.K. Wimsatt, Jr., *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954). See also Beardsley's *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958); and William Cadbury, "Human Experience and the Work Itself: A Review of Beardsley's *Aesthetics* for Film Critics," *Journal of the University Film Association*, 29, No. 1 (1977), 25-32.



(Continued from page 21.)

Nevertheless, there is no question of studio tampering or of capitulation to melodramatic clichés and contrivances. The leftward tracking shot of Lem and Mac wrestling in the wagon cut against the static shot of a rigid, menacing Pa looking out to screen right sets up a strange, interrupted rhythm, as of furious motion repeatedly hammering against an immovable obstruction. The drama being enacted here takes place in a landscape as much mental as literal: it is the scene of the Oedipal struggle.

We have seen Pa to be a powerful focal point of social and religious tradition. The authority he embodies, though, is surprisingly vulnerable — his power depends on its recognition by others. The grain spilling out of the sack after Mac incites the men to mutiny becomes a burden on Pa's shoulders adding to that placed there already, once by Lem, once by Kate. In this third defense of his wheat, Pa must reassert his authority by the only means left — his own personal power and its extreme expression, the gun. He has become society's avenging angel.

Lem, having dispatched Pa's mental image of sexuality as aggrandizing, recovers the reins, his outtheld lantern probing the dark. Thinking he is a rebellious hand, Pa fires into the night, dousing Lem's light. Through an illusion of the subtitle's graphics, Lem's cry of "Father!" seems to recede into the night. If Pa's aim is erring his target is true. He pulls the trigger only after Lem shouts "Pa, It's Lem!", his wrath switching onto the subconscious threat, onto his own son, the original usurper. The concurrence of Pa's expenditure of aggression with the revelation of its consequences, separated only by the space between images, the interval of the montage, snaps the repressive block on his feelings of love, whose instability is the true source of his terrible wrath. The effect on Pa is electric: his rigidity evaporates, and he collapses out of the frame. It is as if he himself had been shot, and the next time we see him he is desperately embracing Lem. Thus the film simultaneously achieves its dramatic peak and its ultimate meaning in the most basic element of its organization: its form is its meaning.

However, Pa's murderous slip makes the recognition of fallibility mutual. It is as if Lem's cry of "Father!" drives out the Father. And there is to be no waffling here either about Lem's Oedipal need. Pa's onus is gone; Lem simply transcends him ("There's some things worse than shooting. One of 'em's the hell you been puttin' Kate and me through."), and goes on to find Kate.

A calmer, more sober denouncement follows as Lem catches up with a sad-looking Kate and offers her a ride back to town. The road back to the city is the dreary culmination of her attempt at forging something different. The country has not been what she wanted it to be, her

haven of security. Instead, it's a place where, more alone than before, she must fight even more fiercely.

But the storm has been beneficial to Kate. It was the answer from outside necessary to resolve a situation in which her personal resistance would prove but a barren exercise of will. Kate, forced to leave, is right to leave. Her assertive stance is not wrong, though, it's just not propitious. In that enigmatic scene in the farmhouse, where Mac puts his arm around Kate, Murnau challenges us to see her from a point of view beyond Pa's. It is her proud defense of her integrity, of her sexual character, her attitude that she is not responsible for the behavior of others, that earns this city girl Murnau's badge of approval.

That she has rejected this dream of chivalrous, strong saviors is evidenced in her refusal to let Lem lift her up into the wagon. Lem, for his part, relents. He looks at her slumped in the wagon and sees, for the first time, what she feels, and it is what he is feeling himself. The memory he recalls to her is appropriate — that of the happiness they were sharing when they first arrived in the country. Lem interprets her gulp correctly. They are alone here, beyond the city and the country; no more dominance and submission between them. Lem can touch her now; she can, without suspicion, respond.

Having experienced these lessons, Kate is now ready to see that while there are "only more farms like ours down this way," as Lem says, that sometimes, individual people can come around for you, and you can make a new start. Back at the gate, a chastened Pa is waiting to ask her to forgive him and stay. Pa takes the reins, letting Lem close the gate. As the wagon drives off down the road, Lem leaps into the bed with Kate. They can resume their interrupted communion and their further passage into experience with the blessings of Pa, their comforting sentry, the only blessing they need.

A film which starts out advertising itself as a departure from *Sunrise* turns out in the end to look much the same. The problem in *Sunrise*, also, is really not the City Woman (who turns out to be, like Mac here, a mental hobgoblin to be flushed out and overcome), nor the city, nor the country, but the idea of love as passive, and of sexuality as furtive and evil, to be divorced from love itself. *Sunrise* was not just about The Man and the City Woman, but about the Wife, who comes to realize in the course of the film that the sensual being hidden by Janet Gaynor's severe wig makes her love a force powerful enough to turn her husband's head from the spells of any power-hungry City Woman or the glittering diversions of the city. Ma and Pa in *City Girl* are *Sunrise*'s Man and Wife grown old, not having met a City Woman.

The reality of *City Girl* is not the openness of the country, but the insularity of its

denizens; its danger that its provincial attitudes will be passed on, creating more and more versions of Ma and Pa, City Vamp, and country hick. Murnau, having seen both sides of America, city and country, recognized the dangers there for his art. He sailed to Tahiti and made *Tabu*.

In 1928, just before he was to film *City Girl*, Murnau wrote an article for *Theatre Magazine*, a personal manifesto of sorts, in which he seems to offer his ideas on the fate of the silent film:

As to the general future of motion pictures — I can only say nothing definite; one can merely conjecture. The only point on which I would assert myself is that the ordinary picture, without movietone accompaniment, without color, without prismatic effects and without three dimensions, but with as few subtitles as possible, will continue as a permanent form of the art. Future developments may give birth to other forms, but the original form will continue with an identity of its own.<sup>2</sup>

Such a declaration must have sounded anachronistic even to Murnau's contemporaries, given the furious refitting for sound that was taking place in Hollywood even as Murnau wrote these words. Certainly they seem to lend weight to the image of Murnau as a nearsighted patrician purist, out of touch with everyday, practical realities.

But there is another possible explanation, I think, Murnau must have seen the direction the cinema was headed in the way of sound, and I think he saw its dangers. His words are a polemic, exaggerated to make a point. What is reflected here is not a fear that gilded Sound would sully his golden Silence, but his belief in the primacy of the art of the image in the cinema. "The film director must divorce himself from every tradition, theatrical or literary," wrote Murnau in this same article, "if he is to make the best possible use of his new medium." Considering the avalanche of theatrical and literary films that followed the introduction of spoken dialogue into the movies, Murnau might well have been concerned.

And who is to say his prophesy has not been fulfilled? A case can be made that in the Italian Neorealists — Roberto Rossellini, Michaelangelo Antonioni — Murnau's belief in the expressive power of the visual image was revived, a heritage which is being carried forward today in the works of Werner Herzog.

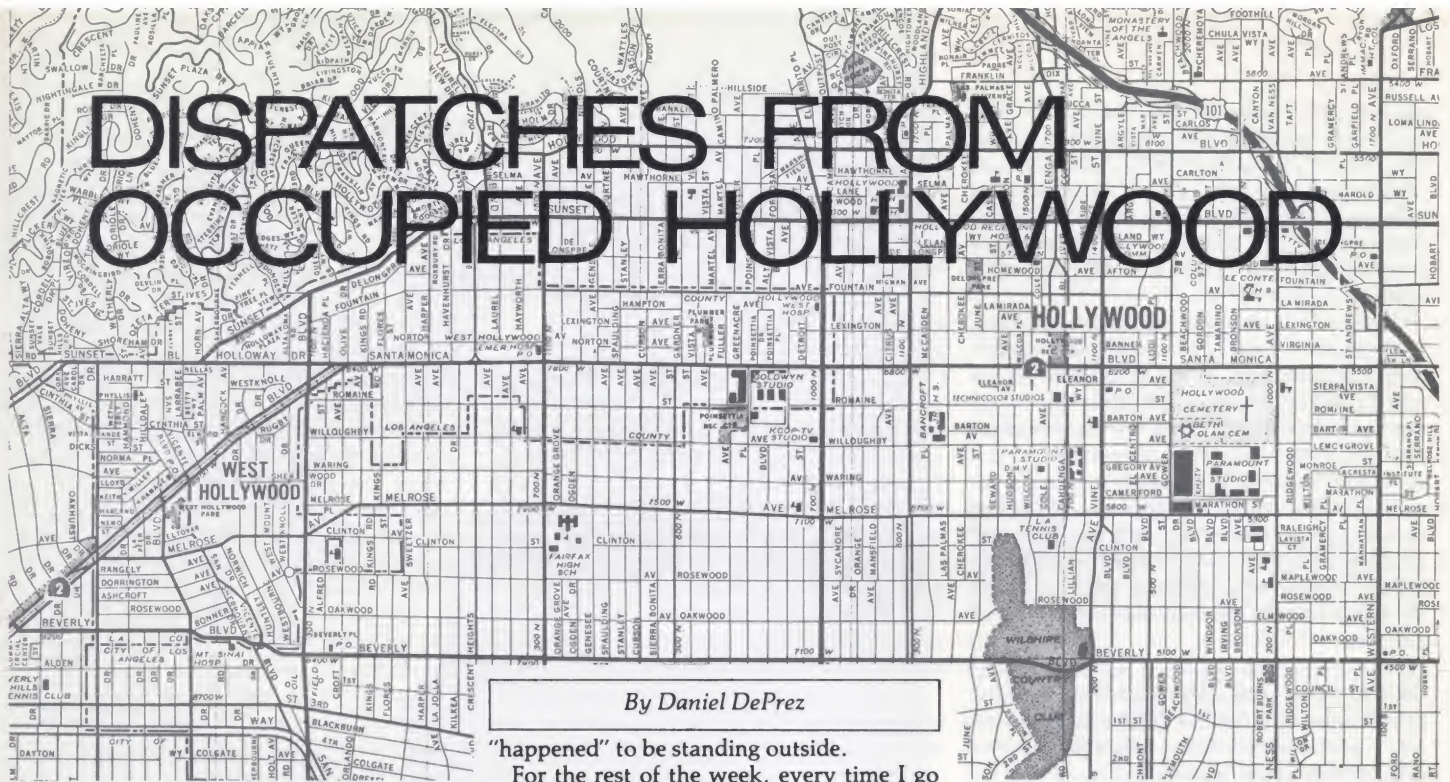
#### Footnotes

1. Lotte Eisner, *Murnau*, University of California Press, 1973.

2. Murnau, "The Ideal Picture Needs No Titles," *Theatre Magazine*, Vol. XLVII, Jan., 1928, pp. 41.



# DISPATCHES FROM OCCUPIED HOLLYWOOD



By Daniel DePrez

"happened" to be standing outside.

For the rest of the week, every time I go down Sunset, I see this sad blonde on duty. After months of cattle calls and "thanks, but no thanks," anything that hasn't been tried yet is a good enough idea. Standing in the sun all day is no more degrading than the cattle calls, and you get to keep up your tan.

I have arranged this visit so that I may spend a Saturday night in Westwood Village. The Village is the center of movie-going in L.A., and I stroll about, taking in the crowds waiting in line for the latest offerings from the "Dream Capitol of the World."

The longest line is for *The Big Fix*. The line, if straight, would probably extend the length of a football field, and the next show doesn't begin for another half-hour. Being near UCLA, and with hundreds (perhaps thousands) on the streets for one reason or another, the area attracts street entertainers of all types.

Quite a strategic move, I think. There is a chance that you will get some kind of pay, you set your own time limit for performing, and you're guaranteed an audience of at least a hundred.

A bluegrass trio is drawing a sizable number of Gucci-ed and Cardin-ed admirers. A singer-guitarist is surrounded by people, but most of them are waiting for a bus. A young juggler has picked an obscure corner for his show, and since he never seems to be doing anything but setting up his elaborate equipment, he gets no business at all.

A bearded young man wearing heavy work gloves is causing quite a stir, however, in the street in front of the line for *Big Fix*. He's yelling at the audience as he dodges cars. I get closer, but not close enough to hear what he's saying, when, after a quick check of traffic, the young man runs, cartwheels, and does a triple somersault in mid-air, landing on his feet.

To paraphrase *The Good Book*, frustration is the root of all Hollywood. Of the more than 300,000 members of the Screen Actors Guild, for example, fewer than 3,000 are making as much or more per year as the average waitress. 90% of the "creative talents" in Hollywood are frustrated over their lack of recognition, the other 10% is frustrated over the pressures and restrictions of success.

One gets the feeling in Los Angeles that hopeless determination is the only way some people can deal with the frustration. A young man or woman will go through nearly anything as long as they can use the experience as the flimsiest of shields against the constant onslaught of "you're goin' nowhere."

The first day in town I see a reminder of this phenomenon. An extremely attractive blond is waiting for a bus outside the Directors Guild of America building on Sunset. I, too, am waiting for a bus, a block down Sunset. She passes up the first bus to come by, and I do, too, to see which she'll catch.

She doesn't catch any. Apparently for an hour or two, she lets every bus on Sunset pass her by, for by 5:00 that day, I am on my way home, and the blonde is still standing in front of the DGA building, waiting. Either her ride didn't show up, I think, or she's a hooker. Or perhaps there is some perfectly logical, pragmatic reason why an attractive girl who looks as though she can afford a car would stand in the hot sun all day, but that reason is inaccessible to a naive, small-town yokel like myself.

My rural logic comes up with a theory: this girl is standing at her post for no reason other than the hope that in front of the one building in Hollywood that, presumably, sees more directors come and go, one director will notice the cute blond who just

The crowd, apprehensive during his speech, goes wild. Tearing is tossed onto the street, but the young man does not break stride long enough to pick it up. "This is the stunt that killed my brother," he announces, then does four handsprings in a row down the length of the block. More applause and money greet his return.

"The Potluck Players", at the venerated Comedy Stores (one on Sunset, one in Westwood) are the would-be David Brenners and Jimmie Walkers who come back week after week to do five minutes of comedy for an audience that regards them as sympathetically as the Romans did the Christians.

Between the two Stores, a kind of farm system of comedy has developed, bringing new talent into the business the way minor league teams train young ballplayers. The ones who have progressed quickly have gone from audition night to emcee in a couple of years. Some have been at it that long and have yet to make a cent.

On Monday nights, a line develops outside each Store. A list is made of the order in which the evening's hopefuls will tentatively appear. The line at the Sunset Store begins forming at 4:30 or so for the show that will begin at 8:00. Usually there are too many comics in line and many do not even get on the list.

Getting on the list is an important step, to be sure, but it means nothing, basically. The order and very existence of each performance is at the mercy of the management of the club that night. Being on the list does not mean that you are guaranteed one of the 5 minute spots for that night. If Richard Pryor or Steve Landesburg walks in and wants to try some new material, he (not surprisingly) gets as much time as he wants. If one of the established regulars gets hot (or feels he needs more time than the five minutes to get hot) then he/she gets to



do, say, 15 minutes. This means that after waiting three-and-a-half hours to get on the list, then waiting three hours to go on at 11:00, you could be told to get lost. You want to come back and try next week? The soonest you can come back is two weeks from tonight, pal. Try the other Store next week.

There is a feeling among those who have made the list and are waiting inside the club to go on that must be a lot like the mood among Marines who have seen comrades cut down in the first wave and now wait in the jungle for their next assault. No one, however, shows any signs of wanting out. A stiff camaraderie develops among some of the comedians, doing schtick amongst themselves to relieve the tension. No one seems to truly be a friend of another. Even offstage, this is the loneliest job in show business.

I'm scheduled to go on at the very end of the night, but, like the others, I'm thankful to have gotten on at the Westwood Store at all. The Westwood Store, although it serves drinks, will allow performers under 21 on its stage; the Sunset Store will not. The big-name discoveries have allegedly been entirely at the Sunset Store, but the very talented and very young Mike Binder (age 20) was picked by Norman Lear for a part in the ill-fated "Apple Pie" after a Westwood appearance.

At the Sunset Store the next week, "regular" Daniel Mora is rattling off, in all seriousness, what amounts to a "Judge Hardy On Stand-Up Comedy" rap. Standing on a bench, right knee up with the right elbow resting on it, his right index finger somberly punctuating his speech, Mora intones, "What we want to see is original material. We don't want to see how well you do someone else's stuff. And we will not tolerate any 'blue' material. Anyone can get a laugh with a dirty joke, but it takes a real comedian to get a laugh with clean material. If you're going to do anything dirty, we don't want you."

It takes a lot of gall to give that speech, since the week before, at the Westwood Store, Mora himself droned on for twenty minutes, tossing the slang terminology for the male and female genitalia about with delighted abandon. At the Westwood store, one need not be 21 to get in and watch the show. If virgin ears exist in Los Angeles, they are more likely to be encountered at the Westwood Store than at Sunset.

At the Sunset Store, the concern over coarse speech seems to be confined to the stage. The burly Store workers order around the customers waiting to get in as would a Marine D.I. These gents laugh or smile as often as King Kong. One of them throws a street musician bodily out of the patio outside the club onto the sidewalk with a genteel, "What're ya, deaf?! Get the fuck outta here, ya dumb bastard!"

It seems to be "anything goes" at the Westwood Store, however. While there are no set restrictions on four-letter words, just

about everyone tosses sex around in their routines, but only in the tried-and-true Las-Vegas-innuendo sense.

On this particular Monday night, and the next week, at the Sunset Store, the hopefuls make up a tableau of unbridled hope. As one scans the bunch, one can almost picture which appearance David Brenner made on the "Tonight" show that inspired a particular outfit.

The three biggest names in comedy at the moment are Lily Tomlin, Richard Pryor and Steve Martin, yet who do the would-be comedians choose to ape? Jimmie Walker, David Brenner: their material is "Shecky Green Talks About Dope." The references are hip, but the style and sensibilities are as old as vaudeville; "trouble-with-women" jokes, "drug humor" (recycled Prohibition humor), and tired observations falling under the general category "Life In This Crazy, Crazy Town We Call L.A."

There are a couple of bright moments, of course. Mike Binder uses his age to his advantage. Binder has a wry, cynical sense of humor and has melded this with his youthful appearance to create a stage persona of The Great American Smart-Mouthed Kid. His observations carry a tinge of "why doesn't somebody wise up?" that is made palatable by the fact that Binder refuses to take himself too seriously, either.

An interesting "set piece" is presented by a duo, one of the few times that anyone at the Comedy Store does a piece that has been written, rehearsed and memorized as a dramatic entity. The piece involves a man in a restaurant having a quasi-sexual relationship with a streak.

Hours of agony pass, and I am on, playing to at least a dozen people near closing time. I hate playing to a small audience; it's like playing Russian Roulette with a two-shot derringer. Chris, the pianist, obliges me with some Christmas cocktail piano, and I introduce the first of four pieces.

"You know, Christmas is not all that far off, and it just sickens me the way Christmas has been commercialized. To counteract this, my family keeps a storybook of Christmas fables. When Christmas comes, we pass the storybook around, and each one of us reads a fable that he or she finds especially moving. I'd like to share a few of these with you."

"At one time, in the Ukranian village of Itsk, an old banker named Batov held the mortgage on all of the homes in the village. Batov was an irritable old man with no family or friends. As the holidays drew near, the people of the village grew fearful, for every year Batov raised the rents on their homes just in time to keep the people from spending the money on each other."

"All over Itsk people complained of evil Batov, but no one saw any hope for the town. As Christmas drew closer, little Peter, a young lad of the village, decided to visit Batov in his house on the hill above

town. 'You all fear Batov so, if someone offered to be his friend, he might change his ways,' he said.

"Sure enough, Batov welcomed the boy into his home and accepted the lad's home-made Christmas card. While there, Batov sodomized the young boy. The old man enjoyed this so that he sent word to the village that, henceforth, he would not raise the rents at Christmas, but that all the young boys of the village should be sent to him instead.

"The people of the village were outraged. A band of them marched up the hill to rescue Peter from Batov. When they arrived at the old man's house, the lad came out and announced that he and Batov had become lovers, and planning on sharing the little boys sent up from the village.

"The crowd threw Peter into the house and set their torches to it. When the place had burned to the ground, the people of Itsk returned to their homes to enjoy that and each subsequent Christmas, free from interference from evil Batov and little Peter."

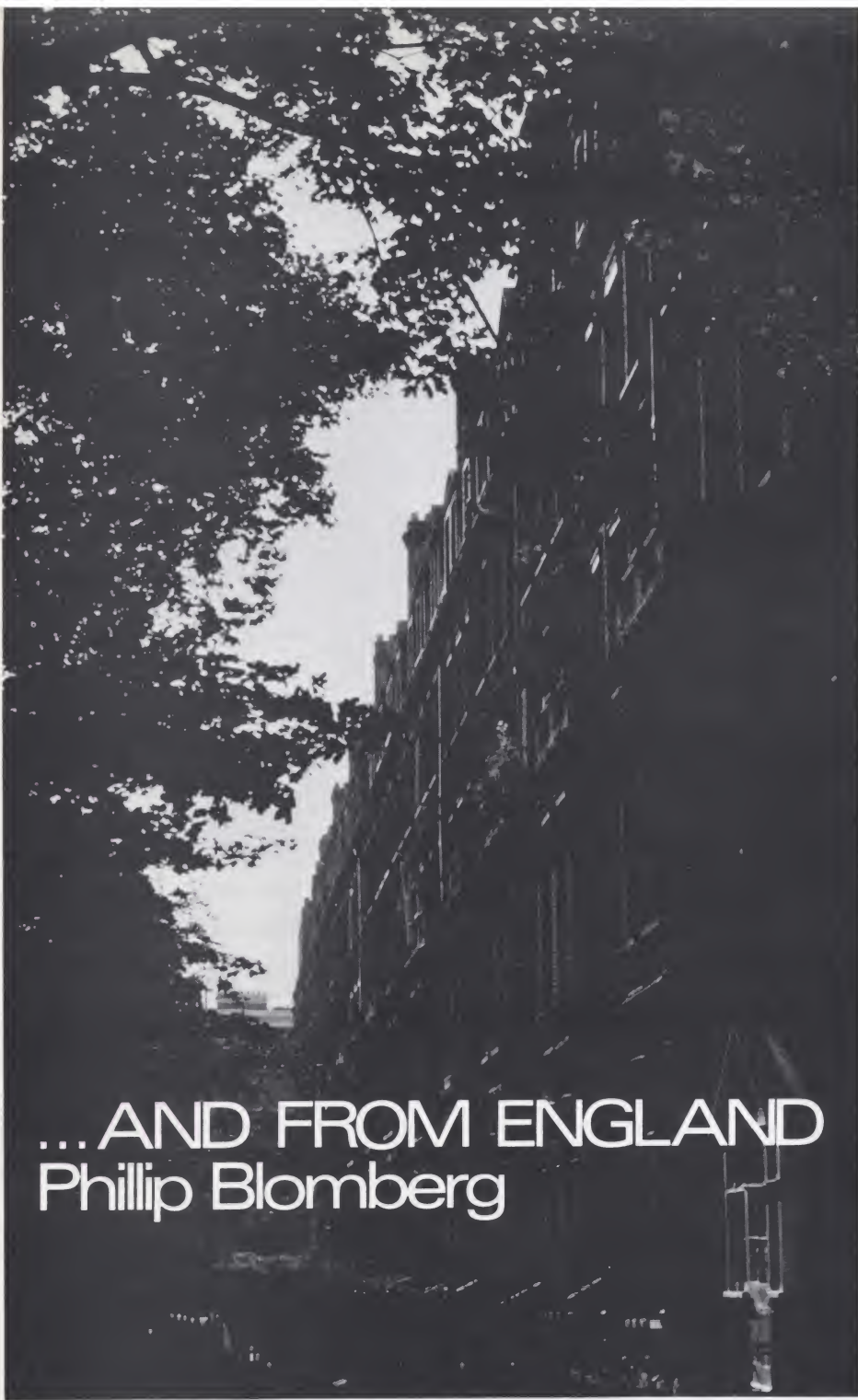
Despite my small audience, the response is impressive. The most uncontrolled hysteria comes from the one remaining waitress. After working in a place like the Comedy Store for five days a week, weeks unnumbered, a waitress soon develops the "I've heard it all before" stance. Most have. I tell the final three fables. The emcee offers congrats, a drunk tries to tell a story and the place closes up.

Somehow looked over by the big-name director who wasn't in the audience, I am still free to go about my vacation business. On the San Diego freeway, I look to my left and see a large, dark green Continental cruising along in the far right-hand lane and slightly behind. As I look back at the car and pull into the lane in front of it, I see that Alfred Hitchcock is sitting in the back seat. Dressed in his Alfred Hitchcock outfit, perfectly mute and immobile, it looks as though Madame Tousseaud has constructed a wax dummy of Hitchcock in the back seat of a car.

I am facing front now, and scream out loud, "Oh...my...Gawd!" The lane in which our cars are moving will turn off shortly into Universal City. Of course! He's on his way to Universal! I decide that I will follow him: I don't know why. When he reaches his destination, what can I do? Nothing. It is simply something that must be done.

Our exit comes up shortly. Mr. Hitchcock's car signals for the exit, and, looking quickly in the rear-view mirror, I do the same. Being first, I turn off the freeway and glance again in the rear-view mirror. Hitchcock's car has shut off the signal and, at the last minute, returns to the San Diego Freeway and continues north. Not able to turn around, I descend into the depths of Lankersham Blvd. as the green Continental speeds away. Foiled by the Master once again.





## ...AND FROM ENGLAND

### Phillip Blomberg

South Kensington, London, 5:00 P.M.

London. At any given moment the greatest city in the world, although this information comes to you from an admitted Anglophile. Granted the city takes some getting used to, but once you've found your way around (i.e., learned the Underground routes) there are more things to do in London on any evening than in any other metropolitan area in the world. From Tower Hall to Earl's Court, from Paddington to Victoria, the West End has more plays than Broadway, more movies than L.A., and more alcohol consumption than both put together. For a movie fan from a small town who used to drool over the

listings in the *New Yorker*, this is paradise.

For the cineaste there's a basic question of what's playing where and how to get there. The dailies are of little help. 90% of them do not carry ads or listings. But fortunately a wonderful magazine called *Time Out* appears every Thursday, not only telling what's playing everywhere in town, but also which tube stop is closest to each theatre. By and large the reviews are to be ignored (never trust a paper that tells you to skip Mann's *Raw Deal*), but their listings are indispensable, as they include along with the regular West End cinemas the fringe theatres, the cinema clubs, the British

Film Institute, and most importantly, the late night programs.

The regular theatres are a curiosity to the average Yank. Some have ushers in Bijou brocade and bellboy caps with opulent decor to match. Most have bars in the lobby, though you cannot take drinks that are alcoholic into the auditorium. Smoking is also permitted sometimes in the larger houses, at first a distraction; I kept expecting the ushers to stop people. Also the smoke is a hinderance to clear reflection. Many cinemas in London practice seat price discrimination, but do not post seating charts, so if one goes with the most expensive ticket one can wind up on top of the damn screen. Another oddity is the commercials shown before the previews. These take the form of vignettes in which the product is thrown in somewhere almost as an afterthought, and of course they are so well made they're often more interesting than the feature, and definitely more funny. My complaint with the mainstream houses is showtimes; you cannot find one that starts any later than 8:30. Perhaps the English refrain from going to dinner and the theatre in the same night, or maybe they just go to bed earlier.

The late shows are where the best stuff is playing most of the time. These programs are for one night at various places about town, usually beginning at 11:00. You can see rare gems you might have to wait years to see in L.A. For example there were *The Looking-Glass War*, *Sabotage*, *Gumshoe*, *Greetings*, *Ugetsu*, *Fury*, and *Sympathy for the Devil* (which I saw in Kensington in what seemed to be an unspoken endurance contest to see who would last through the film's final drag toward the credits — five of us won). The English for the most part seem very knowledgeable about film, although they are so low-key you have to stick them in front of *The Searchers* before they'll admit to seeing a good film.

There were only two problems for late moviegoers in London, neither of them big enough to deter me, but nevertheless of interest to the tourist. The first was getting back to the hotel after the films, as the Underground had usually stopped running by then, and the normally plentiful taxis were very hard to come by (I did a lot of walking). Secondly, the order of most of the showings was not to my liking. When a picture starts at 11:00 I want the best on first, that is, I want *Pierrot le fou* on first and a one a.m. option on *Numero deux*. Another time I had to wade past *Family Plot* and *This Island Earth* (of all things!) to see *Frenzy*, thus making the main attraction begin at 2:30. I suffered through *Welcome to L.A.* and slept through *Nickelodeon* just to see *The Long Goodbye*. The concession stands don't even stay open.

But for all my complaints, and for all the movies, the image of England still in my mind is of the rainswept streets of London at night.







# Reviews

## Interiors

I must be a lousy film critic. I arrive on time for a film, I don't talk during it, or smoke, I don't leave, or scoff at the film, and I took *Interiors* seriously.

Or rather, I should say I liked the idea of *Interiors*. That Woody Allen should make a serious film was not a source of dread to me, but a welcome variation, showing a desire for growth, a need for elbow-room. I put aside the expectations the media attempted to create in me (although any evaluation of the film must be tied to its *zeitgeist*, either as a confirmation or a rebellion), and waited for it to beckon to me as I would any other work of art. In other words, I gave Allen the benefit of the doubt. I assumed since he had made a serious film that he wanted to be taken seriously, which would include having the film analyzed in film journals. However, in a film as open to criticism, even ridicule as is *Interiors*, I think it should be kept in mind that there is a difference between true flaws, and a viewer's grumpy dissatisfaction with a director's realization ("I would have done it differently.") which can be a bad trap, especially if one wants to make films oneself.

In terms of the orchestration of images and the structure of scenes, *Interiors* is very interesting. Allen says that, rather than Bergman, he thinks the film is like O'Neill, and it does have the deteriorating mother, the house by the beach, and enough alcoholics to qualify. It seems to me that if Bergman had made this film, the *angst* of the actors would have been more violent, more other-directed, with repeated confrontations increasing in their desperation. Someone like Pinter, on the other hand, would have given Pearl some secret hold over E.G. Marshall, who would weakly introduce her into the family, whereupon she would take charge and instigate a homo-erotic competition between the three son-in-laws.



*Interiors*: E.G. Marshall and Allen surrogate Marybeth Hurt.

In fact, it is interesting to think of how certain American directors, noted for their focus on the family, and who have a spontaneous grasp of how film works, would have dealt with the material. Welles would have set the story in the past, indicating through the characters the passing of an era. Ford, if he would even touch it with a ten foot pole, would emphasize the father and the disruption of the family from its earlier serenity. Ophuls would have used smooth and delirious tracking shots to show the fatedness of the mother's suicide, while Sirk would have blamed the children for their cold indifference to Marshall's transformation. Most important, none of these mythical *Interiors* would have the lugubrious pace of the real film; there would be no attempt to mimic some imaginary idea of what "great art" is.

One well-handled thread is the breathing motif. It is used to show the change in Joey, and her transition from one mother to another. When Marshall tells Page he wants a separation, Page snaps at Joey to stop breathing so loud. At the film's climax, after Joey has chased her mother into the sea, almost drowned, and been revived by Pearl, she heaves noisily. Pearl has "given birth" to Joey (the sea is a Jungian symbol of the Mother), pulling Joey out of the sea as she pulled Waterston's card from the deck in her magic trick. It is now alright if Joey breathes, and Pearl is shown to be a better person for allowing her to do so nonjudgmentally. I also liked the shifting relationships in the background of the long

take dance scene, because for once in the film, more than one little nugget of information was being presented per shot.

But I must say that the film for me mostly fails. "Woody" here seems to be short for "wooden." He tries to be literate by being Literary, which may of course be the point of the film (that these repressed, hyper-intellectual people deaden life), but his meaning is too much a part of his method, it becomes difficult to separate intention from interior. Interestingly, the film is a savage, humorless critique of people who, in real life, are among Allen's biggest fans, and the film comes across as almost racist in its turgid stereotyping (Alvy getting back at the Aryans who hint that he should buy Wagner?). I think there is value in the purity of the film's moral force. But this is not a questioning film. Allen does not agonize over the meaning of life. Rather, he comes out clearly, anti-intellectually, against the pretences of his family and in favor of the earth-mother, and vital life forcehood of Pearl, but it is as leaden as Antonioni's use of Monica Vitti in *La Notte*. Allen is often construed as an intellectual's comedian because he appeals to the social self-hatred many intellectuals and liberals have, but he shares the athlete's impatience with ideas, reflection and illness, but here as elsewhere I think Allen confuses "intellectualism" with intelligence.

The film's choppy style is annoying. Characters span time, but do not develop. At the end Joey is shown writing, and this is presented as some small significant change,





*Interiors: Sam Waterston, Kristin Griffith, Marybeth Hurt, Diane Keaton, Geraldine Page.*

but it is not felt. We see but we do not feel. Allen has always been too literal. He suffers from the writer's inability to visualize (the great writers — Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Nabokov — can and do). Others have pointed out that, though his ideas are good,

the realization is often poor, the idea left to totter by itself like a senile grandparent who has forgotten to dress himself for dinner. Allen refuses, or does not know how, to surround his ideas with detail. Notice the barrenness of his compositions, necessary in

#### "Sound As Score: The Lack Of Music In *Interiors*"

In an interview, film composer Alex North brought up the fact that composers love films with few, if any, sound effects, because the lack of illustrative sound gives them more to do, more to contribute to the film than a hit title song.

Woody Allen (an able musician himself) has, in essence, scored *Interiors* through what might be called "the artful use of lack of music." If one decides to create a film without a score, as directors have sometimes done, the use of incidental music can be a substitute (as in *American Graffiti*). Allen, however, has decided to score *Interiors* not with incidental music and sound effects, but with sound effects alone (with one notable exception).

Most directors, given the attempted suicide scene with Geraldine Page, would have commissioned the composer to back the screen action with dissonant strings, signifying tension and building suspense. Allen has not, and for a good reason. The scene begins with the raucous unpeeling of the black vinyl tape. The tape's noisy application makes up the bulk of the scene. The hyperreal sound of the tape combines with the camera movement to focus our attention entirely on the tape; not to guess about what will happen after the tape has been applied, but to concentrate on the moment as it is being portrayed.

After what seems like minutes of tape application, the amplified sound stops. Inches from the end of her task, Page has run out of black tape. Her meticulous

application of the tape (sometimes referred to as "decorator tape", ironically enough) has been interrupted as the black tape (contrasting decorously with the white window sills, and black being the color of death) runs out. Fate has played a cruel joke with the designer's plan for her own death, and she must resort to white medical adhesive tape to finish the job (portending, perhaps, that her attempt will be equally unsuccessful).

In any case, the above scene would not have been the prank of circumstance that appeared in the film had Allen decided to score the scene with music. As much as the composer might be asked to join in on the building of this "joke," his music would (if it were to be heard at all) have to be loud enough to take most of the edge from the tape's sound.

Much the same as Page's suicide attempt scene, the scene involving Diane Keaton, at home, suffering from some kind of emotional or spiritual attack as she looks through a window at a winter's rain. After the quiet of the previous shot, watching, the contrast of the water faucet's noisy rush startles us, and grabs our attention to the change of shot. As good as a score might be, if there had been music of any kind in the shot of Keaton watching, the contrast with the (again) hyperreal sound of the tap would have been lessened.

Just as if it were a musical motif, Allen uses the sound of waves on the beach as a thematic element. Until the end of film, as Page enters the sea we are told she loves, the sound of that sea is a constant reminder of her in her absence. It is in the background as Marybeth Hurt and E.G.

comedy of course, but not *de rigueur* in drama. His best films, *Bananas* and *Annie Hall*, attempt mood and tone within a well-plotted framework. Plot and structure are what most directors want from their writers anyway (the good ones just want dialogue — they can plot the film out themselves).

The acting in *Interiors* is good; these are the sort of quietly anguished parts that actors can do in their sleep. The best scenes are the longer ones, like the dance scene, where the actors are free to interact, and the camera is free of its deathly stillness. For the most part the camera instead of photographing the world merely excludes it, like Antonioni at his worst (which is still better than Allen's serious best). Here when a character leaves the frame, he evaporates, a world outside the frame is not suggested, or even hinted at. When Jordan tries to rape Flynn, we don't wonder, "What will Renata think?" because the characters, in this film about the deadness of life, when they are not on the screen, do not live in our minds.

Intellectuals try to fool themselves into thinking that Allen is their comic, but he has an odd contempt for the sensitive and fragile. Allen is the Catholic intellectual's artist. He gives them the illusion of an understanding of present life.

Charles Schwenk

Marshall talk, looking out the window of their old home and it is in the background as Keaton and Melanie Griffith talk on the beach, signalling Page's influence even when she is not present.

Allen's single use of incidental music is telling, also. Seemingly, no one in the film listens to music as a leisure activity except Maureen Stapleton. Although Marshall and Page show every sign of being highly cultured, there is no evidence that they have brought their daughters up with any appreciation for music at all. Renata is a respected poetess, and Joey tries art, acting and photography as a means of expression, but these are all visual (again, a subliminal reminder of the influence of Page, the designer).

Stapleton, as Pearl, the outsider, is the one to bring music into both the story and the film. Lively jazz plays as Marshall dances for the first time in his daughters' memory. This invasion climaxes as Stapleton, carried away by the music, inadvertently destroys a vase; the music and dance destroying the interior decoration of Page, just as the introduction of Stapleton has threatened to break up the family's surface harmony.

These few examples are not meant to explain completely, of course, but to stimulate thought. Several people at each showing of the film I attended commented on the film's lack of music, and how strange their mood was because of that lack. What those people did not realize was that although the film did lack music, for the most part, it did not lack a score, and their "strange mood" after the film only attests to that fact.

Daniel DePrez



## The Driver

### CONTEMPORARY FILM NOIR

What I am about to say about Walter Hill's *The Driver* may surprise some, if not most, readers. The film was not so much reviled upon its appearance as ignored, usually pushed to the bottom of a column bulging with summer's other babies. From *Variety*, which had little to say about the film beyond its dread noisiness ("you can almost smell rubber burning, there are so many screeching tires"), to Stephen Farber, Bruce Williamson and David Ansen, as well as the blanks of *People* and the *Paris Metro*, all of whom said they disliked movies in which the characters have titles rather than names, the mass reviewers, though unknowingly touching on one main concern of the film or other, brushed it aside as an interesting but flat crime film. Only Richard Corliss came to its defense, noting that, while others had remarked on the film's similarity to Melville's *Le Samourai*, Melville himself found inspiration for the scenes in question in the 1942 Frank Tuttle/Alan Ladd film of the Graham Green novel *This Gun for Hire*. (The most balanced, and amusing, negative review was by John Coleman in the *New Statesman*, which begins, "*The Driver* is the second film by the Director. He is better known as a Writer and has written this, too. His first film was *The Streetfighter* and the Critic recommended it" etc.) Richard Schickel of *Time* seemed annoyed that the film did not conform to reality and logic. He wonders why, if O'Neal likes to bang cars around so much, he didn't become a stock-car racer, and why, during the car chases no cops are around when "you or I get hauled in just for failing to make a left-turn signal?" I do not give one infinitesimal hang about the "logic" or "reality" that Schickel seems to admire. Rather, I am concerned with words, images, and values as they are utilized on the screen. A country whose critics manifest this level of thoughtlessness either have no films of grandeur or merit to inspire its writers, or needs new writers.

Certainly the film has its flaws, not the least of which is Bruce Dern. Rarely has an actor of such badness forced himself or been forced upon the viewing public with such intensity and regularity. Originally a character actor of effective range, he has ascended to the limbo of leading man status, at the same time serving as a hex to the films in which he stars, from *Marnie* to *Black Sunday*. There was little difference between his roles in *Black Sunday* and *Coming Home*, either in writing or style of performance. His physical mannerisms are an irritant not only in their repetition from film to film, but in their brute physical ugliness: the pointed, crooked fore-finger, the pinched mouth with just the beaver-like



*The Driver: Isabelle Adjani and Ryan O'Neal.*

incisors poking through the oval wrinkle, the electronically operated eyebrows which twitch up and down seemingly out of the actor's control, as if manipulated by a man in a different room preoccupied with his own affairs and indifferent to the sense of a scene or line of dialogue. In *The Driver* he makes no radical improvement in his persona, and the unpleasant character he plays merges with the performer until the spectator is at first unable to separate the two for intelligent evaluation.

The spare "Hemingway-esque" dialogue does not offend me, nor does it that the characters have no names, a fact, incidentally, one only learns at the film's end, or if one has the privilege of seeing the film's voluminous press material. Ryan O'Neal is referred to by Dern as the "Cowboy," apparently a slang term for a free-lancer in O'Neal's profession. But also, while waiting in his car before the first job, he listens to country western music. The nickname hints at the western genre sensibility that informs the film, as in for example the demonstration scene, which owes more to the young-gunslinger-proving-his-experience motif in films like *Red River* and *Rio Bravo* than anything in *noir*, as well as Dern's role of the aggressive and corrupt official/sheriff who instigates a challenge and contest of wills (*One-eyed Jacks*). *Noir* has always been a loose genre, less constricting than the musical and especially the western. Every individual

*film noir* seems to redefine the entire genre. That there are few true masterpieces in *noir* seems unimportant when the genre is such a textbook source of devices and effects (I'm thinking, for example, of Burt Lancaster's lone, gripping hand in *The Killers* as we hear the descending patter of his murderers' feet on the staircase). Beautiful, precise moments that rarely add up to a whole film (exceptions: *Out of the Past*, *Raw Deal*) and we don't really care.

Walter Hill has made a brave film. He has drawn upon the western as well as upon European influences. He has had his photographer, Philip Lathrop, film this color movie as if it were black and white, in grainy-imaged industrial locales, somber attire for the cast, and the harsh hues of streetlights. He has taken an actress of incredible subtlety of emotion and gesture and made her into a zombie. An excellent screenwriter, he has written a script with little dialogue. He has made a *noir* which reflects the sense of life in the seventies, without the disguise of nostalgia, or the tyranny of violence.

The trailer to the film is misleading in that it implies that Adjani comes between O'Neal and Dern, but actually she is peripheral to the action of the story. In fact, the trailer also shows Adjani and O'Neal kissing, an ending to a scene which seems leading up to a kiss but, in the film, doesn't. If there is a triad in the film it is of O'Neal, Dern, and a character called "Teeth" (Rudy





*The Driver: Bruce Dern and Matt Clark.*

Ramos).

Dern, the anal, obsessed, and competitive cop is first introduced to us while he is playing pool. Immediately he is associated with games and competition. That he is playing by himself reflects two strands, both the isolation of his character and the hesitancy of others to get involved with Dern, seen in the cop played by Matt Clark. His ambition with O'Neal is to catch "the cowboy who's never been caught." After this line is uttered occurs the foiled robbery. This allows Dern to set into motion his machinations. Dern convinces the thief Glasses to help him set up O'Neal. It's all a game that Dern takes seriously. As he says later to Clark, "I can make you a better cop. Every morning read the sports page. Everythings there. Winners, losers, scores, what happened. We have a better game than anything they play." But you have to be a player. Dern frequently calls Clark an asshole, suggesting his own projected fixations such as the desire to clean up, the desire to control. Later he is going to save Glasses's "ass." His set-up ultimately becomes over-complicated, and an unpredictable x-factor prevents O'Neal from being arrested.

Teeth is a betrayer in a symphony of betrayals. He is the most fearful and the most vicious character. His vendetta against O'Neal seems to be caused by nothing more than his inability to deal with O'Neal's self-confidence, but perhaps it is O'Neal's supreme detachment, or his discrimination. On the stairwell of his hotel, O'Neal is confronted by Teeth, who still wants him to work their job. O'Neal refuses. Teeth pulls out a gun, the first move in a self-destructive ritual of humiliation and contrasts. O'Neal dares him to fire it. O'Neal slaps him and Teeth drops the gun. "You do anything else, I'll come back and kill you." O'Neal, unable to resist a challenge here as later with Dern, slugs him with a left, knocking him down the stairs.

Cryptic dialogue follows. "I'm just trying to do my job," says Teeth. O'Neal replies, "So am I." "I just wanted to talk." "You did." There is a pause. O'Neal has told Teeth to go home, and in the distance a train whistle seems to invite him away, and Teeth leaves, but he does not go home. No one has a home in this film. What O'Neal means is, "Get out of this line of work, you are not good enough." Later in the film Teeth surprises O'Neal's connection (Ronee Blakley) in her apartment. He does not speak (he does not just "want to talk") and his silence compels Blakley to talk. He forces her onto a couch and inserts his pistol into her mouth, a trite scene, but the violation is communicated well. Understandably, she betrays O'Neal. "I told him I wouldn't get killed for him." Then Teeth says "Sure," and fires his gun, using a pillow as a silencer. In a quiet and cold moment of cinematic effectiveness, Teeth brushes a pillow-feather off his vest, the absent-minded gesture of a vain and frightened man.

O'Neal, the focus of the film, has, in Dern's words, no friends, no girlfriend, no job. "You've got it down so tight there's no room for anything else. And that's a real sad song. Only nobody's buying sad songs this year." Dern could be describing himself, or anyone else in the film. Later Adjani tells him that he is playing a sucker's game. "When I lose," she says, "I just go broke." It is a point of professional pride that he accept the challenge from Dern. O'Neal is his own judge in testing his limits. He refuses to have further dealings with the hoods of the first caper because they were late. He does not want to associate with Glasses's gang because they are "shooters" and because he does not like them on sight. He destroys their car in order to show the precision of his professionalism against the fear that cripples them. I find O'Neal's obsession with perfection and his choice of work over other social activities resonant

with the times (that it is criminal work only emphasizes the matter of choice in a line of work where jobs "are hard to come by"). The media presents play over work as if work were an unclear subject which just happened to take up most of everyone's time. Being a criminal is O'Neal's way of pursuing distinction. His work, driving fast cars at night, is much more exciting than the dull job of Dern and Clark, who drive a truck around in a dismal city and threaten cheap hoods in bars. In a sociological subtext (unintended by the director, I'm sure) O'Neal is resisting the mechanization of ordinary work.

The structure of the film is razor sharp, some of the best plotting to be seen in an American film in some time. After Teeth's failure with O'Neal, we see Glasses in Dern's bar, telling him he didn't know what to do. "You came here," Dern replies. "That shows you know what to do." There follows a cut to a medium long shot of O'Neal on his bed. Dern appears at the door in the center of the frame. His purpose is to make O'Neal take the job with Glasses. During their interchange the shots are medium. We are always distanced from the characters, O'Neal being the only one we ever get to see in close-up. Dern holds out the lock pick he found earlier in the wreckage of O'Neal's stolen car. "I like chasing you," Dern says. O'Neal replies, "Sounds like you've got a problem." But by taking back the offered pick he acknowledges the unofficial, extra-legal challenge of superior professionalism. Next O'Neal accepts the job from Glasses, and tells him that Teeth cannot come along. Teeth: "I don't like it." O'Neal: "That's the whole idea." The script moves like a chess game, each moment having plot reverberations beyond just the setting up of characters. Thus the long climactic chase is made inevitable. When Dern realizes that Glasses has betrayed him, he says, "We've got a few more moves." When Clark disagrees, Dern warns him, "You're on my team, and I'm the manager."

The second chase is a variation of the first. Now O'Neal chases, and mostly indoors. The game of chicken is repeated, and rather than cleaving the cops like a hot knife of criminality, he sends the green driver into the gutter. O'Neal shoots Teeth, who refuses to "give up," and tells the driver to go home. Thus O'Neal consolidates his destiny, and does everything that would make him a winner except win.

Though flawed, I think the film works on both an intellectual and visceral level, due to the rigor of its structure and the subtlety of its social concerns. It does not seem to have the mythological aura that major hits have, but it does have methodical prescience. I find the film haunting, as Dern is haunted by the Cowboy in the last shot under the credits, walking away from the camera in defeat, while the western music associated overridingly with O'Neal plays over him.

*Norman O. Grace*



## Superman

(1) The special effects just aren't good enough. Flying around a studio with green New York behind him is fine, even though the wires we cannot see are there, but when Superman takes to chasing missiles across the country it looks again like the same old speeded-up, white-outlined figure against a more slightly dim, grayed background. Landing and taking off is O.K., again if it is in the studio, and the act is taken a few steps further than, say, the television show, (for example, C. Reeve doesn't run and hop off the frame), but still one would like to see the impossible — the camera over Superman's shoulders as he leaps off the ground and flies the equator. The Krypton sequences look like out-takes from *Earthquake*. The decor is dull, and so cold and opaque there is no sense of loss when the place goes. Frankly I think the comic book was better on this score, if only because there was more detail. The first appearance of Superman, rescuing Lois Lane from a helicopter, is actually good, if only because it is something we might have seen somewhere (and this sequence is probably disquieting to those New Yorkers who lived through a similar, Supermanless, event). Clearly, though helicopters are "statistically the safest way to travel," it's better to be Superman. "Hi, I'm Clark; fly me." Also you get the close physical attention weary-world jet-lag addicts crave behind their *Esquire's*, but never seem to get this side of the smut parlors. I dwell on the special effects only because the ad assures me that I will believe a man can fly. I didn't, but then, I didn't want to, so my previously non-existent expectations were disappointed, and my attention was distracted from the areas of prime interest: the human, or humanized, relationships.

(2) We have here about ten movies in one. On Krypton we have the misunderstood, just and brilliant scientist/jurist who stoically, calmly, saves his son from disaster. Then we have Ford pastoral with a dose of Mom and Capracorn, followed by *All The President's Men*, a couple of disaster films, and a camp comedy. The tone changes aren't drastic, but there seems to be an attempt to cover all 100 million dollars-worth of bases. One wants to have made felt real the idea of Superman's parents dealing with the kid, but in the film they get short shrift. A few of the comic's characters are touched upon in Superman's isolated, summarized youth, and the general creation of his Fortress of Solitude is a mystery to me. As in most science fiction films, we are shown a few pieces of magical glass and this is supposed to signify an advanced race. The *Daily Planet* scenes have a pleasant reality to them and the Lex Luther plot is funny. Donner's direction is adequate, but his suspense scenes are not as exciting as his reputation would lead one to expect. In the first part of the film, in lieu of



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Superman: Christopher Reeve.

seeing Superman fly, the camera tracks and cranes all over the place; the audience I saw the film with, seeing Clark walking everywhere, including the North Pole, kept wondering out loud when he was going to fly. When he is first sent spinning to earth from Krypton, I half-expected him to appear above Earth like the star child in 2001, beginning where the Kubrick film left off, the new *Übermensch* (or should I say *Überperson*?) finally taking man those first few bold steps forward. Later I was a little angry when Superman reversed the spin of the earth, sent time packing, and saved the momentarily dead Lois Lane. Apparently Superman is special enough to not have to endure the loss of a loved one. Oh well, he had already lost two dads. I just hope he doesn't come to abuse his power, by stopping time for the least little complaint, like a cut finger, or a sore tummy.

(3) I estimate that Brando got paid about 30 thousand dollars a word, making him somewhat like J. Colossal McGenius in *Li'l Abner*. Several other actors and actresses are wasted, for example Susannah York (so perfect in Altman's best film, *Images*) and Trevor Howard who brings echos of *Mutiny on The Bounty*. "I do not need a flag, Mr. Jor-el, for unlike you, I still have a planet." (I assume that Terence Stamp and his two Limboed Cohorts will return in the sequel). Jackie Cooper hits one as an editor, but not as Perry White (I see James Cagney or Lee J. Cobb, or perhaps even Brando, with the part instead). Marc McClure is good as Jimmy Olsen physically, but as with most of the characters, the part isn't big enough. Older movies, before the film business was destroyed, and simple two hour movies acquired snail's paces from indifferent, television-trained directors, could squeeze a great deal of plot and character into a mere 90 minutes. Ned Beatty and Valerie Perrine both play well off Hackman, who has all the best lines, but the film changes to comedy when they

appear, destroying the film's consistency. Margot Kidder is definitely not a Lois Lane. Some anti-feminist backlash has made her a klutz, a bad speller, flighty — in other words her and Olsen are transpositions from 50's era parody of childishness and helplessness, both quite different from the almost radical, but always aggressive, characters of the comic. Jeff East is an effective and affecting young Clark, and Christopher Reeve turns out to be a pretty good actor. He does a good job of making believable the notion that Clark and Superman would be perceived as separate people without the crude differentiation and barbaric simplicity of the early issues of the comic. He even manages to look non-plussed by Kidder's unkind rendition of an awful pop song, (which she, more irritatingly, recites rather than sings) as they float through space, probably because he didn't have to hear it while filming.

Charles Schwenk

## Dog Soldiers

We refuse to acknowledge the other title of this movie.

Once again a fair to bad movie is notable for its excellent acting, as back in the old Hollywood days a superb performance would elevate a piece of puerile rot. I need not enumerate the commercial plot, which concerns America's Vietnam experience, about which better films have been and will be made. Michael Moriarty, who has never learned to enunciate much less move his face, and Tuesday Weld, who seems a cross between Tammy Grimes and Sandy Dennis (but with a delivery more hiccuppy) jar with the cruel and assured understatement of Anthony Zerbe (note especially his delivery of the line "pretty moral basically?" followed by the contemptuous "Jesus!") and the savage stooge pecking order of Ray Sharkey and Richard Masur. Because of the textbook Karel Reisz wrote



on editing, the knowledgeable viewer expects more flash. Reisz, however, follows a principle of invisible cutting, very smooth, very sharp. The script, from a book I know or care little about, and which is therefore to me no sacred text butchered by writers, is an adequate B script with a tinge of post-sixties sensibilities. Nick Nolte, who is worth the price of many admissions, is given many memorable lines, for example his Nietzschean proclamation of rebellion, "All my life I've taken shit from inferior people. No more!" Earlier, after Moriarty has explained that he had come to Vietnam to find himself, Nolte's Ray Hicks replies, "Yeah, and what a bummer for the Gooks." Nolte gives a rich, hard, dynamic performance which will, like so many other movies that sink into anonymity or HBO, at least keep it in memory.

Ken Alakine

### Comes A Horseman

*Comes a Horseman* is a disappointment coming as it does from a most talented director, Alan J. Pakula, a man of cinematic taste, wit, and control. The banal script, by Dennis Lynton Clark, tries to fool feminist-oriented consumers with its "strong woman" focus, but is actually a rehash of slow and underdeveloped plot mechanisms we have seen time and time again. Michael Small's music is dull and unmemorable, and you'll have to take my word for it because I don't remember anything about it. Gordon Willis's photography is good, as usual, but what else did both the director and the audience expect? There is nothing individual about the look, to set the film off from other pictures by Pakula and Coppola. Willis is so distinctive that I think he requires special use, like a rare drug that induces unusual side effects that can kill the patient one is seeking to cure. The prime annoyance, however, is Jane Fonda, who no longer seems to impersonate a person so much as Portray a Role, which would be fine except that we have seen that role in her last three films. Fonda is very good in comedy, even bad comedy like *Barefoot in the Park*, but when she is "serious" (excepting a few notable examples, such as *Klute*, the masterpiece of the seventies) she is all repetitious mannerism. In *Julia*, for example: though her voice is a sometimes perfect instrument, attaining levels of realism that blush with freshness (as in her delivery of the line, "This is a stupid conversation!"), more often than not she is drawing upon certain mannerisms that scream "Jane Fonda" and don't mesh with the structure. (I'm not wild about Vanessa Redgrave either, what with her bug-eyed neurotic headshaking she reminds me of a left-wing Faye Dunaway.) In *Horseman* she screams to the Jason Robards character "Damn your soul," and then tries to continue her work, unable to maintain her strong-woman pose. The cry, the turning



Girlfriends: Melanie Mayron.

away, seem so artificial, done only for the camera, not for the film or the audience. Compare James Caan, who, next to her, tries tentatively to give her physical reassurance. The film does not test Caan, but within his and its limits, he is always natural and spontaneous.

But again, the script is so damn dull, with its barroom brawl, the absurd and trite burning of the house with Fonda and Caan locked in the closet, the wise old geezer who loves the land, the selling-the-cattle bluff, and so on. Long takes are held on everybody, and in Robard's case it seems to be done in order to give him a smidgen of humanity. But the story is so slight, the smidgen becomes a mere stain. Can't anyone write good scripts for actors anymore?

Ken Alakine

### Girlfriends

After the most pleasant credits for a film in years, *Girlfriends* turns out to be a fine film with, unfortunately, a few mistakes. It is so fragile a film it seems to hang on the screen by an act of heroic will. History, however, may remember it most of all for presenting Melanie Mayron in a sort of star-inducing showcase. For the most part the acting is uneven: Mayron is endearing, Eli Wallach is very good once again in a small role, Bob Balaban is smooth in his stereotype, Christopher Guest annoying in his, while Anita Skinner is execrable as the other girlfriend. As with many films from young directors, the major problem is the script, which is fragmented, unfocused, but full of many good scenes of relaxed communication. Although Weill has a good sense of character and pace, she often doesn't know where to put the camera. In an early scene the camera is at one end of a narrow hall photographing Mayron and Skinner who stand at the other, Skinner's back to the spectator as she reveals her

new-found love. Elsewhere camera placement is merely pedestrian. But the biggest irritation of this and other contemporary films is the fragmented and elliptical editing style, pulling the spectator by jerks past stretches of time. One yearns for at least the simple fullness of script of a *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* or *It's a Wonderful Life*, and instead usually gets second-rate New Wave. Anyway, one looks forward to the development of both Weill's and Mayron's careers.

Gloria Heifetz

### Bloodbrothers

In case you've been banished from the American cinema of the last two-to-five years, allow me to fill you in on an important development in modern society: the nuclear family, as we know it, no longer exists in any form except among Italian-American families in either Brooklyn or the Bronx.

Please forgive the sarcasm. Do not, however, excuse Richard Mulligan for *Bloodbrothers*. This tale, allegedly one of familial loyalty and the need for individuality within a family unit, has taken one step too far in several directions simultaneously. Tony LoBianco, Richard Gere and (especially) Paul Sorvino are wasted in Mulligan's fetish for grotesque humanity.

Why, first off, must we as an audience endure one more film in which everyone, between gratuitous mach-obscenities, tosses "deezee", "yooze" and "wotzamatta?" back and forth like verbal bocce balls?

After the obligatory opening shot of the New York skyline, LoBianco is introduced through a prank he plays on his brother, Sorvino. The two are married, we learn, but they proceed to flash, proposition and chase women as you or I might have done at age 16. The two are obviously enjoying themselves. Would that the audience could make the same claim.

Richard Gere is introduced next as the Young Man At The Crossroads. Gere enjoys working with kids, is very good at it, but father LoBianco has plans for the lad in construction. The central conflict is now upon us: will Gere sink into the emotional tar-pit of LoBianco and Sorvino's world, or will he make his stand and do what's right for himself?

Good luck if you try to get an answer from Mulligan. *Bloodbrothers* is the first "major" film I've seen in a long time that has not been satisfied with merely resolving conflict poorly. The film leaves us with no clue as to what Gere will decide, since he runs away from the decision at film's end, fleeing to Parts Unknown (an idea which occurred to several more astute moviegoers as I watched the picture).

The cast of caricatures in the film is virtually endless. Gere's girlfriend as the beginning of the picture, the hood who steals her from Gere, Gere's mother/LoBianco's wife and the jellyfish intellec-



tual who lusts after her, and others, are each presented in one and only one emotional state. Everyone's state, by some strange coincidence, gives them the same contorted features Mulligan's camera dwells upon so lovingly.

Marilu Henner, as Katie, brings the only realized and semi-sympathetic character to the film. The traditional Easy Woman With A Heart of Gold, she is the same catalytic influence on Gere that Karen Gorney was on John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*. Unlike *Fever*, however, where Gorney's influence continues past the end of the picture while her relationship with Travolta remains platonic, Gere's relationship with Henner is far from platonic during the film, and her maturing influence is dead before the picture ends.

In one of the film's precious few pleasant scenes, Gere tells a tall tale to a group of children with whom he works, explaining the film's title in the process. Perhaps the scene is enjoyable due to the lack of interference from Mulligan, or perhaps due to Gere's abilities. It is hard to tell from *Bloodbrothers* and *Looking For Mr. Goodbar* whether Gere is someone to watch in the future or just another Pacino/DeNiro clone who has seen too many early Brando films. In any case, the storytelling scene is a blessed relief.

The film does present a very dreary picture of every female involved. Sorvino's wife, we learn, killed "his" son by giving him too much (falling asleep while nursing the child in bed and smothering it), while LoBianco's wife has successfully terrorized Gere's younger brother into swearing off food entirely. Perhaps the women have a right to behave wretchedly. The only acts of kindness committed by Sorvino and LoBianco are for the benefit of other males. Not one female character in *Bloodbrothers* is treated with even modest respect, with the possible exception of Henner, who is first befriended by Gere, then ditched by him, then befriended once more, but then, ultimately, ditched in favor of Gere's younger brother.

Without having taught his father or uncle a thing about independence and love, or learned a thing about his own life, Gere takes his younger brother and runs away from the job we are told that he wants to keep, the girl we are told that he wants to be with, and the family we are told that he loves.

By the end of *Bloodbrothers*, the audience has been lied to on a grand scale. This member of the audience would rather see a film with no pretensions that is true to itself (say, for instance, *The Great Texas Dynamite Chase*) than a "serious" film that dodges the only shaky thematic element it offers.

Daniel DePrez

## Paradise Alley

Stallone's directorial debut indicates a capable hand, as well as evocative photo-



Paradise Alley: Sylvester Stallone and hard-won monkey.

graphy by Laszlo Kovacs, and the story kills an hour or two, but ultimately one asks oneself, "So what?" The plot is familiar, with various characters along the way appearing in gritty, amusing, and distinctive ways. It makes me think of an Italian *Interiors*, a dark, male, mirror-image of Allen's film, with Armand Assante, as one of the three brothers, an ersatz Pacino from the *Godfather*. The film is all effect, but usually without intelligence; after a stunning forties tilt of Joyce Ingalls from the toenails up, the subsequent development of the story reveals that Stallone is trying to get away from her, even though the tilt was from his POV. As the film progressed I wondered how the cheap hood of Kevin Conway would get his comeuppance, and I was disappointed to see transvestitism resorted to. Frank McRae as Glory is superb and, I think, the principle reason for seeing the film.

Gloria Heifetz

## Body Snatchers

*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* has what Hollywood pundits like to call "production value." By this I think they mean one or two name stars, a cameraman of some competence, and an art director of some repute. A healthy budget (around three million in this case) ensures enough of a "quality" look that moviegoers will not mistake it for a cheap, independent re-make or a Japanese import.

Much of the money spent to update the 1956 Don Siegel classic has gone for special effects. We are shown more specifically how bodies grow out of the alien seed pods and how they take over healthy bodies, a process only suggested in the earlier film. These and other scenes showing the infection of the planet by spores from outer space are technical achievements of the kind only Hollywood can muster. All of this is backed by Dolby stereo.

In this version, Donald Sutherland, a San Francisco health officer, and Leonard Nimoy, a psychiatrist who writes self-help books, attempt to minister to the physiological and psychological ills that beset contemporary society. Ultimately, only Sutherland and his lab assistant Brooke Adams have managed to resist being "born again" into a world free of care, worry, and emotion.

Unlike Siegel's film, this new version is a vision of total paranoia. There is no escape, no last minute turn of circumstances, no naive confidence that public exposure of a problem implies its solution. Sutherland's attempts to burrow through the bureaucracy which governs a human anthill so large as San Francisco are futile. Whether the "authorities" have already been "replaced" by the aliens or are merely floating to the specific gravity of their incompetence is a moot question. In effect, it makes no difference. Director Philip Kaufman implies that bureaucrats, Republicans, and other stuffy people are already standing in line to sell out to the aliens.

While the original *Body Snatchers* was unabashedly a B movie and therefore able to grind along on its own sub-respectable kind of gritty energy, this new version wants to take itself seriously. For Kaufman, the plot is only a metaphor. In a recent interview, he suggested what the metaphor might be: "Men and women — maybe through industrialization, maybe through a bombardment of complexities in our society, or maybe through their own wishes and laziness — have become people who no longer value feelings and emotions."

The film suggests that the question of "going over" to the aliens is a moral one. Deep in the psyche is a voice which urges surrender. Those who are courageous, like Donald Sutherland, resist the voice, just as many people resisted the mindless call of Fascism. However, the agent that actually



triggers the conversion is physiological: sleep. As Sutherland's pursuers confidently tell each other "He's got to sleep sometime."

There are other ways the film is less satisfying. Too much of its energy is given to regaling the processes of pod growth and some of the sullen mystery is lost as a result. While W.D. Richter's script starts off with a lot of dash and pizzazz, the interest drains away. The greatest sin of all however, is unforgivable: the chase is too long, and it ends in a set-piece destructo scene that has come to characterize current film-making and is an interesting index of our profound resentment of technology.

Despite the fact that *Body Snatchers* tries too hard to be serious commentary on contemporary life, it is nonetheless a compelling entertainment and its greatest weakness may be only that it will inevitably be compared to the earlier, and to my mind, more successful version.

Norman Hale

## Suspiria

Dario Argento's latest film marks another gain for the stumbling campaign for subjectivity in the cinema, a method that seems to be the sole province of the horror/suspense genre. The story concerns a ballet school that harbors a dread cult, committed to sustaining the life of a physically ethereal satanist. Jessica Harper stumbles into and destroys the cult. The film boasts an extravagant decor, and one could devote two or three viewings to just an eyeing of the wallpaper, the carpets, or even the crucial iris in Joan Bennett's office. Decor doesn't define character so much as oppress it. The bombardment of color and pattern is contrasted to the dreariness of the death sites: bathrooms, attics, a stone courtyard. There are the usual suspense ploys of one or two initial deaths, to show how ruthless the killers are, and the death of a best friend to put the heroine's life in more jeopardy, and the pounding score of *Goblin*. As usual in Argento, Harper plays an outsider who has to clean up because the natives are either prone to stupidity or hysteria. In this film Argento experiments with long, low tracking shots, no higher than the heel of a shoe or the upper hemisphere of a colored marble ball. High and low, in and out are contrasted: the maggots from the ceiling; the friend's escape through a high, small window; the bowels of the school opposed to its wild, elaborate front; the death by hanging of the first victim; and the bird that carries the spirit of death. When Harper talks to Udo Kier there is a zoom between them focuses on their fuzzy reflection in the window behind, a metaphor for the vague shadows haunting the characters. There is much death-in-life in this film (a preparation for his next film?), what with the old satanist, the resurrection of the wretched friend, the blind pianist, and the cretinous killer. The evil forces are more pervasive here



Suspiria: Jessica Harper.

than in previous Argento films, where the single maniac is replaced with a house-full of conspirators. Where Leone is the poet of open spaces, where triads of men fight before broad landscapes, Argento is the poet of inner spaces, where madness fights sanity, and the weakness that leads to death is the overwhelming of rationality by fear.

Ken Alakine

## Books

### John Huston: Maker of Magic

By Stuart Kaminsky. Boston. Houghton Mifflin, 1978, 237 pages.

American film critics have never quite seemed to know what to make of John Huston; whether his work has been praised or disparaged, it has almost always inspired critical overkill. Huston's career has been so diverse and erratic, that most critics have inevitably been (or quickly been thrown) out of step with it. After a dazzling debut with *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and a pair of studio assignments, Huston made several highly-regarded war documentaries. His fourth feature, *Treasure of Sierra Madre* (1948), almost universally acclaimed as authentic film art (at a time when the phrase had little currency in discussions of American movies), marked the high point of a major (and widely appreciated) creative outpouring that Huston sustained through *Moby Dick* (1956). Then, with his reputation already beginning to decline, the director shocked his admirers by accepting a series of well-paid assignments, the worst of them little better than hackwork, between 1957 and 1960. Through the sixties, Huston seemed to be searching,

with intermittent success, for creative direction. He found it decisively in 1967 when, with *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, he began a second period of sustained creativity, more uneven than the first, infinitely less appreciated (many critics had virtually written Huston off by this time), but possibly more substantial, culminating in some of the finest work of his career, including two of the foremost American films of the 70s, *Fat City* (1972) and *The Man Who Would Be King* (1975).

Because what was true of one Huston "period" has so often been irrelevant to the next, Huston criticism has been marred by a kind of built-in obsolescence. Huston's most eloquent early defender was James Agee, whose now-classic *Life* magazine article, "Undirectable Director" (1950) saw its subject from the following perspective:

*The Maltese Falcon* is the best private-eye melodrama ever made. *San Pietro* ...is generally considered to be the finest of war documentaries. *Treasure of Sierra Madre*...is the clearest proof in perhaps twenty years that first-rate work can come out of the big commercial studios.

...To put it conservatively, there is nobody under fifty at work in movies, here or abroad, who can excel Huston in talent, inventiveness, intransigence, achievement or promise.

A decade later, these judgments seemed debatable, and today they are all obsolete. Hawks's *The Big Sleep* has supplanted *Falcon* even more decisively than Ford's *The Battle of Midway* has *San Pietro*. *Treasure of Sierra Madre*, once hailed as the outstanding film of a generation, today looks like something less than the best film of the year of its release, 1948. Finally, among directors born in this century, even from the perspective of work done by 1950, Huston now seems to have been decisively



excelled "in talent, inventiveness, intransigence, achievement (and) promise," by Rossellini, Ophuls, and Welles.

Add to these changes in critical taste the precipitous drop in quality in Huston's work from *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) to *The Unforgiven* (1960) and a reassessment of an inflated reputation was almost inevitable. In the mid-sixties it came, with Andrew Sarris twice striking (in a *Film Culture* article in 1963, and again in *The American Cinema* in 1968) the definitive blow:

Huston is still coasting on his reputation as a wronged individualist with an alibi for every bad movie...Huston has confused indifference with integrity for such a long time that he is no longer the competent craftsman of *The Asphalt Jungle*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *The African Queen*, films that owe more to casting coups than to directorial acumen.

Timely as it may have once been, today this attack sounds short-sighted, distorted, and unfair — not least for taking the rather foolishly untenable position that skillful casting is a specimen of something other than "directorial acumen". From the perspective of Huston's fine recent work, particularly *A Walk With Love and Death*, *The Kremlin Letter*, and the aforementioned *Fat City* and *The Man Who Would Be King*, it is clear that Sarris had no more understanding of where the director's career was going than where it had been; today, his comments look even less defensible than Agee's. Nevertheless, Huston remains appallingly underrated; a recent *Take One* critics' poll of the best films of the last decade showed Huston's work held in no higher esteem than that of Bob Rafelson or John Schlesinger.

In this context, another wave of revisionism seems almost inevitable; hopefully, it will eventually produce more perceptive work than Stuart Kaminsky's *John Huston: Maker of Magic*. Agee and Sarris, each in his own way a first-rate critic/historian, were able to make pronouncements that, however short-sighted they look in retrospect, in their times at least sounded definitive. Kaminsky merely sounds sophomoric, particularly when, in his introduction, his fannish enthusiasm seems to gush from the pages as he proclaims his desire to tell Huston that:

...there wasn't a film of his I didn't like and respect, even those films he has himself denounced...my favorite film in the world is the neglected *The List of Adrian Messenger*...there are a handful of his films that so move that no matter how many times I see them, I am unable to speak for several minutes after the lights go on.

The adulatory fever (and the staggering lack of discrimination) of these comments suggest that Huston may soon need to be

rescued from admirers intent on over-inflating his reputation. The earnest naivete of the introduction recalls Harry Chelm (the buffoon of *Beat the Devil*); not surprisingly, despite a year of trying, Kaminsky was unable to arrange a personal interview with his hero.

Despite the advantage of hindsight he enjoys over Sarris and Agee, Kaminsky writes less coherently or intelligently than either of his predecessors. Further, despite his enthusiasm for his subject, Kaminsky does almost nothing to justify his introductory comments. Typically unexplained is his admiration for *The List of Adrian Messenger*, a quirky choice as best Huston film of 1963, to say nothing of "favorite film in the world". After a detailed plot summary, Kaminsky has little to say about *List* beyond pointing out the fact — well-known to Universal's publicity department even before the film's release — that it contains a lot of disguises. A similar inability to distinguish interesting details from artistic substance mars virtually all of *Maker of Magic's* discussion of Huston. In addition, despite his claim that Huston's films "move" him, Kaminsky's writing is almost completely dispassionate. His dull plot outlines and solemn lists of similarities among films establish Huston's "seriousness" only at the expense of obscuring the real power of the director's magic; nowhere does the book do more than hint at the rich combinations of irony and affection, compassion and cynicism with which Huston has animated some of the most vivid and compelling characters in American movies. Not only are Kaminsky's lists lifeless, they are also aesthetically dubious, implying, as they do, that the substance of a director's presence in a film can be found, not in its tone or texture, but in external details like its story-line.

Perhaps because of his determination to "like and respect" every Huston film, Kaminsky evades even the most fundamental questions of aesthetic merit; *Maker of Magic* seems unwilling to acknowledge the rather elementary fact that some Huston films are better than others. To cite an obvious example, *The Asphalt Jungle* is superior, by almost any reasonable standard of conceptual richness, dramatic force, visual expressiveness, psychological coherence, or clarity of directorial vision to *In This Our Life*. Here, though, the completed *Jungle* is mentioned only in passing, while the visual content of *Life*, a standard Warner Brothers Bette Davis vehicle, is analyzed with surprising, if misplaced, precision. Similarly, *Maker* rhapsodizes about Huston's use of the cinemascope frames of dubious films like *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* and *The Barbarian and the Geisha*, and virtually ignores the standard-sized, but infinitely more expressive frames, of *Fat City*.

Comparable errors of judgment or emphasis recur throughout the book. Kaminsky's indiscriminate "objectivity"

frequently clouds his critical judgment. His lists are as often of minor details as of major themes. Worse, his complete indifference to matters of tone or context leads him to some exceedingly dubious comparisons. For example, his observation that "Daniel (*The Man Who Would Be King*), like Dobbs (*Treasure of Sierra Madre*) becomes obsessed with gold and power and suffers for it," overlooks virtually every detail of dramatic tone, acting texture, or directorial point-of-view in either film. Equally unconvincing is some of the evidence Kaminsky cites to show the kinship between Huston and the subject of Freud: Freud "fears that his mother will abandon him"; "when the father dies, Freud feels guilt and a need to understand." This comparison may be valid, but it is also meaningless, since comparable feelings are probably common to almost all children raised in nuclear families.

Interesting writing or significant biographical information might easily have compensated for *Maker of Magic's* critical shortcomings. Unfortunately, Kaminsky the biographer complements rather than transcends the failings of Kaminsky the critic. The book gives little evidence of sophisticated or imaginative, or even meticulous, research. As a study of Huston's life and films, *Maker of Magic* is neither original nor substantial. Kaminsky prepared his entire manuscript without interviewing Huston directly and generally relies on secondary sources. At one point, the book even unwittingly parodies this approach by using the remotest possible sources to describe an incident: Robert Morely is quoted at length directly from a passage in Lilian Ross's 1952 *Picture* (an engrossing account of the making of *The Red Badge of Courage*) that quotes Huston pronouncing a man lying on a street as "just fine". Quoting Morely, who was not there, directly quoting Ross who was, seems pointless, if not perverse.

Because Kaminsky is not always scrupulous about attribution of facts, it is sometimes difficult to tell whether his information comes from original research or previously-published Huston material. The sections of *Maker of Magic* dealing with the director's early life bear the mark of an unmistakable, and frankly acknowledged debt to Agee's *Life* article. Kaminsky is less explicit about his reliance on William Nolan's *King Rebel* (1965), a vastly entertaining series of anecdotes and facts about Huston's career. Kaminsky mentions *King Rebel* only infrequently, and the second time he does so, it is to cite Nolan as the source of a detail originally included in Agee's article. Despite its casual attitude toward *King Rebel*, though, *Maker of Magic* obviously relies heavily either on Nolan's book or on information from identical sources. (Nolan's list of acknowledgments runs to more than a hundred names; Kaminsky acknowledges the help of only a handful of people who have had



direct contact with Huston.) Not only do the two books resemble each other in their one-or-two-films-per-chapter organizations, but also in the repetition of a surprising number of facts and stories. At one point, Kaminsky even reproduces Nolan's misspelling of the name of film reviewer Archer Winsten as "Winston." When material is duplicated, Kaminsky occasionally supplies more details, but Nolan is almost invariably more entertaining.

*King Rebel* and *Picture* make it clear that Huston is an inherently fascinating subject; *Maker of Magic* demonstrates how colorless writing can easily make him seem dull. In general, Kaminsky lacks the dramatic sense even to tell a story effectively; this makes his tendency to paraphrase, rather than quote directly from his sources, particularly irritating. Worse, his sense of humor is so underdeveloped that at one point he edits a Huston story about General Mark Clark's narration of *The Battle of San Pedro* so clumsily that the punchline finally has to be explained. This pedestrian writing becomes an acute problem in the chapters dealing with Huston's films since *King Rebel's* publication; with only a handful of interesting stories to relieve the tedium of Kaminsky's comments, this section of *Maker of Magic* becomes almost suffocatingly boring.

*Maker of Magic* is primarily valuable as a synthesis of existing Huston material. Unfortunately, Kaminsky's haphazardness limits the book's value as a resource. The bibliography, for example, cites an illuminating Huston interview from the May/June 1973 issue of *Film Comment* without mentioning two other Huston pieces in the same issue. While neither article is nearly as useful as the interview, a book that sees fit to cite material from a source as insubstantial as *People* magazine should at least offer some explanation for omitting articles from a journal as reputable as *Film Comment*. Similarly incomplete is the filmography. Despite extensive and detailed lists of credits for each film, neither the month of a film's release nor the running time are identified. Nolan's filmography, though far less comprehensive, does include those facts, along with available data on the costs of making specific films; hopefully (film-making being, after all, a business) financial information will eventually become a standard item on filmographies.

One explanation for the superficiality of *John Huston: Maker of Magic* may be the confused origins of the project. Recently, his successful roles as a villain in *Chinatown* and a pitchman for RCA color television have made Huston something of a celebrity, and hence fair game for a "popular" biography. At the same time, as one of the few major American directors who had not been the subject of a book-length critical study, Huston had long been ripe for a "serious" analysis. Evidently, Kaminsky attempted to combine the two approaches. The idea may have sounded

promising, but in practice it is unworkable; a popular audience can only digest simplified — or simplistic — critical comments, while the serious audience is apt to insist on factual accuracy, even to the detriment of the picturesque (if sometimes unverifiable) tall tales that are often told about a director like Huston. Consequently, *Maker of Magic* dabbles in biography and dabbles in criticism, and does neither well. But even with a more coherent approach, Kaminsky still seems like the wrong person to write about Huston. With neither a commitment to original research nor direct access to Huston, Kaminsky's credentials as a biographer are, at best, suspect. Further, with a doggedly serious tone and a sense of humor too dull even to tell a joke effectively, Kaminsky seems particularly ill-suited to appreciate the complexities of an artist as colorful and erratic as Huston.

There is, in fact, something almost cosmically ironic in the whole history of Huston criticism; the director's reputation seems fated to follow a path comparable to that taken by one of his characters. First overrated as a boy genius, then banished into relative obscurity, Huston has only recently, with the passing of many of the old masters who once overshadowed him, done work that deserves the accolades he was once given so freely. Ironically, now that he has earned the praise, no critics of eloquence or stature have yet come forward to offer it. Kaminsky, despite his contemporary perspective, carries on the old tradition of treating a fragment of Huston as the whole, of inventing a mythic Huston and substituting him for the real one. If Agee mistook Huston for Orson Welles and Sarris confused him with Carol Reed, Kaminsky does no better with a dull and reverential approach that at times nearly succeeds in confusing Huston with Ingmar Bergman.

The shortsightedness of most Huston criticism has been fostered, in no small part, by the director's own perversity. The most obvious case in point is the turn Huston's career took after *Moby Dick*. A "serious" director, particularly one with the freedom to select and produce his own projects, is simply not "supposed" to submit himself, voluntarily, to contract work. Even giving Huston credit for walking off *A Farewell To Arms* when he began to feel "like a prostitute", his willingness to undertake projects as dubious as *The Barbarian and the Geisha* (1958) and *The Unforgiven* (1960) reflects a casual shortage of integrity and a streak of creative irresponsibility shocking in a filmmaker of Huston's stature; this casual corruptibility is a major flaw in the director's artistic temperament.

The obvious explanation for the films of the late fifties, and more than a handful of other Huston films, is the lure of easy money. In retrospect, though, the claim of a "sell-out" is too broad and too obvious. It is particularly worth noting that Huston,

even at fifty, as he was the year of *Moby Dick's* release, was far from being a mature artist. Many of even his finest early films suffer from flaws that reflect the inattention to detail of an artist with a notoriously short attention span. The most famous example is, of course, the storied mutilation of *The Red Badge of Courage*. After prodigious efforts in planning, writing, and directing this "dream project", Huston simply lost interest in it and went to work on *The African Queen*, making no effort to resist the extensive and reportedly ruinous changes the MGM front office made on *Badge*. As a result, Huston now disowns the released version of the film he once hoped would be his masterpiece. Equally telling is the presence of a dreadful, distracting Max Steiner score on *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, a conspicuous flaw in what many feel is Huston's most perfect gem. With all the care that so obviously went into shaping every frame, every scene, every line of dialogue, such a complete lack of attention to the detail of the soundtrack is almost inexplicable. In striking contrast to this early carelessness is the meticulousness of the mature Huston, the aptly precise, wonderfully expressive soundtracks of *Fat City* and *The Man Who Would Be King*, far from detracting from their respective films, enrich them with almost poetic layers of resonance. This difference certainly suggests a broader, fuller approach to film-making. Whether Huston actually learned to marshal his finite directorial energies more efficiently by coasting through the films of the late fifties is problematic. Nevertheless, by the time of *The Misfits* (1961), Huston's style had grown more economical and his attention span had increased noticeably; few of his later films bear the marks of a quarter-mile half-heartedly finishing a mile run.

If Huston's artistic growth has been largely a process of learning to work within his limitations, the directorial perspective from which he has surveyed the world has remained almost intransigently constant for a third of a century. Huston's thematic concerns, too, have remained relatively consistent, though the diversity of his material makes it possible to identify "themes" in only the most general sense. Almost every Huston film revolves around a group quest directed toward some specific end. As the group's struggle becomes one to transcend the limited dimensions of the world in which the questers find themselves, the quest may take on metaphysical significance. Huston's overriding interest, however, is not in the quest itself so much as the ways his characters address themselves to it, and to the adversity that almost always accompanies it. Participation in the quest is less a testing which implies the kinds of judgments (Huston is disinclined to make) than an opportunity, and an arena, for self-revelation. Under Huston's keen directorial eye, behavioral nuances are often articulated



with a precision and clarity that elevates them into acts of self-definition.

A key part of Huston's skill at characterization is the director's ability to define the physical world so clearly that it registers immediately as a defining factor in human action. Sarris claims that Huston's "characters manage to be unlucky without the world being particularly out of joint"; actually, the reverse is true. Even the openings of Huston films form a striking gallery of images of a world gone definitely awry. Signs are seen backwards (*The Maltese Falcon*), cops search for a few harmless Indians instead of a ruthless gangster (*Key Largo*), houses of worship are the scenes of chaotic choir practices (*The African Queen*) or surreally secular sermons (*Night of the Iguana*), the tranquil beauty of a stream in a lyrical medieval landscape is marred by the presence of a floating corpse (*A Walk With Love and Death*). The opening of *Fat City* evokes life on skid row so compellingly, first in a series of introductory shots, then with a sustained take in a grubby hotel room, that it is easy to overlook the fact the Billy Tully's (Stacey Keach) fumbblings during this unforgettably atmospheric shot are all directed toward securing from his environment nothing more substantial than a match that will allow him to light a cigarette without first getting dressed and going outside. When his world denies him even this modest request, he sets forth on the excursion that starts the film in motion.

But if the world is indifferent to Huston's characters, the director himself is not. Like the surviving miners in *Treasure*, Billy Dannreuther in *Beat the Devil*, or Bresnavitch in *The Kremlin Letter*, Huston finds relief in an ironic laughter that acknowledges the humor, as well as the pathos, in the plights of his characters. Huston has an almost limitless capacity for the appreciation of humanity in all its follies, eccentricities, and failings; frequently, this appreciation expresses itself humorously, but Huston's empathy for human foibles is almost invariably equal to his commitment to depicting them.

Huston is a singularly non-judgmental director; his irony is almost always mingled with appreciation. For him, the complex business of living makes facile judgments among human beings (identical in the basic fact of their common mortality) impossible. Even villainy, pursued with the screwball flair of Joel Cairo insisting on his need to search Sam Spade (*Falcon*) earns the detective's — and the director's — ironic respect. More seriously, the singleminded ruthlessness of Ward in *The Kremlin Letter* is the nature of the world in which it takes place, (and the virtuosity of the performance) accepted with grudging respect. People in Huston ultimately do the best they can.

As even a perfunctory survey of Huston criticism suggests, there are considerable dangers in generalizing about the director's work. Though there are consistencies of



John Huston, Edward G. Robinson, and Bogart on the set of *Key Largo*.

theme, motif, and image from one Huston film to the next, the search for the Platonic ideal of the "John Huston Film" can obscure the singularly unique qualities of individual films. This is particularly true of the diverse acting styles to be found in Huston. The director's temperament and talents have not inspired him to follow a single approach to handling players; with his uncanny skill at matching actors with roles, he has generally been content simply to let actors do their job. Though this has occasionally misfired (John Wayne in *The Barbarian and the Geisha* and Gregory Peck in *Moby Dick* are probably the most notorious examples) Huston's films are full of extraordinary performances. On most occasions, the director has handled actors, and their screen persons, with the virtuosity of a master strategist. This is most obviously true of Humphrey Bogart's evolution, under Huston's direction, from *The Maltese Falcon* through *Treasure of Sierra Madre*, *The African Queen*, et al. Seasoned pros, like Walter Huston (*Treasure*), and Michael Caine and Sean Connery (*The Man Who Would Be King*), have likewise fared exceptionally well in Huston films. Perhaps most striking, though, has been the way virtually the entire casts of *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Asphalt Jungle*, *Beat The Devil*, *The Kremlin Letter*, and *Fat City*, have reached or exceeded the apparent limits of their talents.

In its use of actors, *The Misfits* is a particularly illuminating Huston film. Even by the director's customarily high standards, *The Misfits* is an extraordinarily well-cast film; screenwriter Arthur Miller reportedly tailored one part for his wife, Marilyn Monroe, and a second for his friend, Montgomery Clift. In retrospect (leading man Clark Gable died before the film's release, Monroe did not live to

complete another film, and Clift made only two more before his death), *The Misfits* has an unusually strong sense of mortality; the precariousness and vulnerability of human endeavor seem almost tangible. In no small part, this reflects the emotional state of Monroe, the film's central presence. Shooting on the project was suspended when she suffered a nervous breakdown, and her very being seems to radiate not only the voluptuous vulnerability that made her a star, but also the nervous energy of someone living on the edge and not quite certain she can ever get back.

Miller, as Monroe's soon-to-be-estranged husband, conceived the screenplay, which evolved from his original short story, as an opportunity to articulate, through the character of Roslyn, some of his romantic misperceptions about the Goddess/Woman he loved but could not live with. Unfortunately, the screenplay, the only one attempted by playwright and Serious Literary Person Miller, reflects, along with the author's feelings and insights into his wife, his fundamental mistrust of, and occasional contempt for, the medium of film. Thus *The Misfits* is full of lines of dialogue that talk about Roslyn's "gift for life," but sound hollow and pretentious next to the cinematic fact of that gift; the words seem to proceed from the assumption that film viewers would be too obtuse to see the vibrant energy Monroe registers in every frame.

The problems of literalness and verbal redundancy recur throughout the film, but two examples are particularly striking. In one scene, fairly late in the film, Roslyn is tentatively moving toward an emotional commitment (and therefore vulnerability) to Gay Langland (Gable). At the end of the long, slightly macabre sequence, much of it in a single take, where unraveling bandages



become a kind of crazy joke, Roslyn is left standing alone, leaning her back against the wall of a house while the shadows of a nearby tree play on her body in the moonlight. Finally, she looks upward and sighs "Help me." The redundancy of the line betrays a fundamental mistrust of the expressive capacities of film. The words are unnecessary, since Roslyn's fear and vulnerability, implicit in the situation and the way the sequence is photographed, are directly communicated into the way she moves. Worse, the redundancy of the words violates the integrity of the character as a fundamentally non-verbal person; to require Monroe to communicate primarily through dialogue is to abuse her talents. This happens even more emphatically in another scene, much earlier in the film, where Roslyn is sitting in a bar; as she talks about her mother, her fidgeting fingers communicate all there is to know about her feeling of the pain for an insecure childhood. Unfortunately, she then redundantly speaks the words, "All of a sudden I miss my mother." The line, far from revealing anything about the character, forces the actress to repeat an emotion, and, in the struggle to avoid mere repetition, Monroe reaches for an emotional level beyond the range of the character. As a result, one of the most effective scenes in the film degenerates into momentary self-parody. The problem seems to be that Miller conceives communication verbally, while Monroe doesn't "conceive" it at all, she simply *does* it, with gestures, expressions, and most definitively with her screen presence.

Huston's role in all this is problematic. The published screenplay tends to idealize Roslyn into a perfected abstraction, whereas Huston tends to prefer his characters imperfect and specific. Monroe's physical, non-verbal intensity, which gives her a specific identity as a complex individual rather than an abstract Life Force is consistent with the individuated performances in other Huston films. But if Huston deserves a share of the credit for Monroe's singularly forceful performance, he must also accept some of the blame for its limitations. By trusting her genius for non-verbal communication only halfway, and declining to re-shape the screenplay more decisively, he is guilty of a failure of directorial nerve.

A comparable tension between abstractions and specificity is present in several other characters in the film. Guido (Eli Wallach) continually speaks the words of a man of passion and sensitivity, and he does so with genuine feeling and conviction; but even as he means the words, he is also using them as strategic ploys in his ill-fated effort to entice Roslyn into the life of flat tires and danceless evenings that destroyed his first wife. Significantly, both the sincerity and the calculation are true to the character's perceptions and values.

Even more complex is the treatment of

Perce (Montgomery Clift), the Victim of Maternal Betrayal. By 1961, Clift was well on the way to destroying his own career, and he plays Perce as a man whose self-destructive tendencies flow from within himself as much as from his surroundings. The character, living always on the edge of self-pity, speaks of the time before his father's death when his mother was an ideal figure ("like a saint"). She re-married shortly after her husband's death and, to add to Perce's feeling of betrayal, the new husband offered him "wages" to work on the ranch his father had wanted him to have. In the published screenplay, Perce explains that his mother did nothing about this because "She don't hear me" (the emphasis on "hear" making her failure almost a positive act). In the film, Perce uses the same words, but Clift's delivery is so drunkenly low-key that the word "hear" gets almost no special emphasis (implying that he may not have done much to make her "hear" him). This change adds retrospective emphasis to his earlier characterization of his mother as a "saint", an ideal figure without human impulses or limitations; her betrayal of her son begins to sound like the product of his own disillusionment, as a wound that may be self-inflicted; whether it is or not, it *could* be.

Gay Langland, too, despite his apparent self-reliance, is unable to reconcile himself to the mutability of the world around him. The central metaphor for this is the ritual of catching the wild horses. It "beats wages" — the loss of independence — and there is a certain romantic appeal to the notion of hunting free animals as a means of preserving human freedom. By the end of the film, though, it is clear that catching the horses has been "changed around"; the horses pursued by airplanes and trucks are no longer sold as pets for children but as meat for dog food. Huston demythicizes the physical process of the hunt, as well, breaking the action into a series of brief, discrete shots that reduce the process of capturing the horses from an exhilarating metaphysical quest into a chilling mechanical process. The most striking images in the hunting sequences are the horses, pathetic, wildly struggling for survival, so thin their ribs are visible, tripping over networks of ropes until they are finally, ignobly subdued.

Like all Huston couples, Gay and Roslyn have great difficulty overcoming their estrangement and mistrust; their quarrels about the horses are merely the focal point for that difficulty. The night before the hunt, the two have an argument, ending in a long, single-take sequence that culminates with the film's definitive Huston shot, an image that recurs, in some form, in almost all of the director's films. Roslyn lies on her side on the back of a flat-bed truck, facing the camera, at about her eye level, as Gay stands behind her. As they talk, he reminds her of how often the things people do, like her dancing, are falsely judged,

adding "I could've looked down my nose at you...but I took my hat off to you." The line, of course, could be Huston addressing virtually any character in his work. Roslyn responds with a gesture of conciliation, turning onto her back and looking up at Gay standing above and behind her. This pose, with one character in the foreground on his or her back and a second character above and beyond the first, is a virtual Huston signature. If the reconciliation in the sequence is transitory, the recurrence of the motif is striking and appropriate; Huston's people are adrift in a world casually indifferent to their quests, a world that offers, at best, the hope that, in a prone moment of despair or sickness or impending death, they may find, however fleetingly, a comforter who will offer a moment of peace, or sanctuary.

David Coursen

# Music

"Scoring"

By Daniel DePrez

In scoring, "mickeymousing" refers to the almost nonstop use of music to accompany every gesture, movement or idea of a film. The term comes from the cliché-ridden musical accompaniment usually associated with animated cartoons. Nowhere in film music is "mickeymousing" more subtle, or more prevalent, than in scoring "behind" or "under" dialogue.

Almost everyone with an opinion on the subject agrees that there is such a thing as too much music for a film, or that certain scenes would be best presented without musical accompaniment. The arguments begin when one begins looking for guidelines on when and how to score for dialogue.

Before going any further, allow me to offer two views on film dialogue and the scoring thereof, both quoted from Irwin Bazelon's *Knowing the Score*<sup>1</sup>. First, Richard Rodney Bennett:

"I try to use as little music as possible these days in films. In fact, I just turned down a very big film because I didn't think it ought to have music at all. It was based on an Ibsen play [*A Doll's House*], and I thought it impossible to put music behind Ibsen's dialogue."

Not only does the preceding statement show an admirable sense of commitment from Mr. Bennett, but the composer is saying, in a sense, that since it was impossible to score behind dialogue, a score would have been unnecessary. Depending on the director's ideas for non-speaking segments of the film, of course, music could be used to score parts of scenes before, between and after actual dialogue. Rather than score around dialogue, however, Mr.



Bennett chose not to join the project.

When a film composer turns down an offer such as *A Doll's House*, it is frequently not because that composer does not believe that the director's hopes for the film's music cannot be met, but merely that he (as a composer) is not the one to supply the music the director had hoped for.

I have reproduced here an excerpt from David Raskin's score to *Will Penny*. Raskin, composer of *Laura* and countless film scores, has written music that might be compared to an orthopedic mattress: the score has specific musical nooks and crannies designed to fit the dialogue which will go on top, so that neither score or script will have to be mangled to get a comfortable fit.

Pay particular attention to the last two measures. The most important words of the excerpt are accented by the fact that music does accompany all other words in the speech. A solo stands out only if other instruments are playing at one point or another. In the penultimate measure there is a quarter rest, a breath, between music and dialogue. In the last measure, the three eighth notes of the top and bottom staves form a rhythmic counterpoint with the three words above them.

The composer here deliberately considered such things, as evidenced by the fact that they are the only words of dialogue to be written out with note-values: the dialogue is, at this point (especially) interwoven into the score which supports it.

The other option (if one is to use a score at all) is to use the music as a sort of punctuation for dialogue, preceding speeches, filling in gaps in dialogue, and tying up thoughts conveyed in dialogue musically. Valuable words on this topic come from John Williams, also in an interview in Bazelon's *Knowing the Score*:

"I think a composer should think of the dialogue as part of the score; he could write it as accompaniment for a violin concerto rather than compose a score to exist on its own."<sup>2</sup>

Williams's thoughts refer back to the Raskin example, where the composer went so far as to notate words in the script as though they were musical notes. Also implied, however, is the approach used by Craig Safan in his score to *Corvette Summer*; a thematic relay-race, where meaning is conveyed by both music and speech, but not by both at the same time.

As Kenny and Vanessa/Eleanor are riding in their van, Vanessa is rambling on about her next change of name. During the last word of her speech, Kenny has caught sight of his Corvette. The Corvette guns its engine, and, for a moment, Kenny is paying half-attention to both Vanessa and the car; then his obsession takes over and a short chase begins.

If one views the total sound-picture of a film to be the soundtrack, then the orchestration of this short exchange is nothing short of impressive. The human

Preacher: "Beware the wrath of the Lord He'll strike them down with blood..."

on their heads. He punisheth the sinner. Life for life... eye for eye..."

Excerpt from the score *Will Penny* by David Raskin.

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"...it might be a mistake for me, Rosalynn..." FX: "Vroom."

Kenny: "Oh, no...!"

Violins, Trumpets, Celli

Excerpt from the score *Corvette Summer* by Craig Safan. From the MGM release *Corvette Summer* © 1978 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Inc. Rights controlled by MGM Affiliated Music, Inc. Reprinted by permission.

voice and machines both operate with an element of discernable, but sometimes subtle, pitch. In Annie Potts's wistful reading of the word, "Rosalynn," her voice slides from a B-natural to an F-sharp. At this point, the Corvette is idling audibly. After her last word, the Corvette guns its engine, and produces an ascent in pitch

from the same F-sharp that Potts has just sounded to the B-natural she began on, then it descends back to F-sharp.

The idling of the Corvette is not audible until the word "Rosalynn" is heard. As the word is spoken, the Corvette and Vanessa both demand the viewer/listener's attention, just as they both demand Kenny's



attention. This lasts but a moment, however, as the Corvette guns its engine (in Vanessa's "voicing"), and the chase is on.

I will be the last one to make any claim that the director or composer Safan coached Ms. Potts to pitch her voice just so, or that the Corvette was re-tuned to compliment the actress's reading. The coincidental matchup appears to have registered subconsciously with Safan, however, as he bases both the beginning of the passage and the beginning of the scherzo with a B-natural.

The audience's recognition of the Corvette on the street dawns on them as the crescendo begins. Kenny, too, voices his realization during the crescendo with "Oh...no!" This line is followed immediately by the accented "A", played in unison. The scherzo figure (the B-natural and E-natural) begins in the next sixteenth-note. The scherzo marks the true beginning of the chase. The fact that it begins just a sixteenth-note after shows that Kenny can't wait. As soon as possible after the recognition has set in fully, he must get to the car.

This is what I meant by the "relay-race" method of scoring. The word "Rosalynn" is

the contact point, and from there on, the meaning of the scene is conveyed by visuals and music, rather than visuals and dialogue, as in the Raskin example.

I must also apologize for the sketchy nature of the excerpts presented. The Raskin sample is relatively complete, copied from a miniscule reproduction of Raskin's own copy. The Safan example is sketchier yet, with almost assuredly mistaken voicings. These are not as important to the subject, however, as the rhythms and pitches themselves. The excerpts do illustrate the points I wished to make.

*Bits And Pieces:* Glad to hear that Van Dyke Parks was chosen to score Jack Nicholson's *Goin' South* (with Perry Botkin, Jr.). Parks is an amazing composer who has deserved a film scoring assignment ever since he broke onto the music scene with his rich and lyrical album *Song Cycle*. If only Warner Brothers will release an LP...

1 *Knowing the Score*, Irwin Bazelon, Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, NY, ISBN # 0-442-20594-5, pg. 210.

2 *Ibid*, page 200.

in the oval group before the frantic candy-counteress, on the once red rug now black with the stains of gum, soda, and a million little shoes. Sean took out of his bulging pocket a crinkled brown paper sack and uncrinkled it. He gave to Martin, as he extracted them from the sack with methodical glee, an Hollywood bar, a Clark bar, two Bit-O-Honeys, two black licorice Switzers, and three Milky Ways. For himself he kept one Bit-O-Honey, one Black Cow, four red licorice Switzers, and a Payday. Both of them believed this *trésor* would last through three features and several cartoons, that they would not succumb to the hot, sharp aromatic lure of popcorn, or soda, or a rainbow popsicle. At least they're better than Elmer's Glue and erasers, they would reason to themselves when eventually buying the stuff during the first intermission, when so many other people, all around them, were doing the same, running down the long double ramp from the balcony to the lobby.

There was nothing to be done about the perpetual hum of the audience during the films. Sean slugged a kid in front of him who had popped an empty popcorn bag. His exasperation, his anger at the management for deliberately keeping low the volume, as if it would suppress the gossiping girls and mock-expectorating boys, eventually passed, obliterated by his fascination for the films. He loved the lowered lights, the hush of excitement, the rising curtain with wiggling images seemingly inside it, intended to give the illusion of live people behind the fabric, and the flickering colors in the dust-mote rainbow above his head. The selective sound seemed realistic to him: the wooden echo of heels against pavement thrilled him as it failed to do in audio reality; the crack of a gun; the sudden rush, then hush, of an orchestra as a door is opened, then closed; and the mythical slapping sound of a punched jaw. (He had not punched anyone in the jaw, although he expected to, and he was only partially aware that in this instance film did not coincide with fact.) Images differed from film to film and scene to scene in mood, color, and angle, and he was forced to acknowledge in some unconscious way, another hand and eye more experienced than his own. Sounds were universal and he could smile, slit his eyelids, and with ecstatic satisfaction, feel it was all for Me! Me!

In ten, in twenty years he would not remember why he had liked the film he was now watching, and perhaps he would not even remember seeing its cavalcade of leprechauns, the close smiling face of young love, a town's indifference to an old man's drunken dreams, the death ride through the clouds, or the euphoric dancing of a tiny village: vague creases in the contours of his autobiography. As he sat now, however, with his legs thrown over the seat in front, his hand poised with junk halfway to mouth, eyes large, he felt within himself the

# Recueillement

By Johannes Lucas

## VOICE OVER

### A Short Story

The B---- Theater was bright from sun and vibrant, the thin streets around the salmon-pink building were barricaded with a metal moat of automobiles, with the reflection of noonlight in the heavy glass doors a harsh curtain in the eyes of the children running forward. If they had been able, they would have seen in the thick quadrant of glass an unruly marching army double-timing toward their light, bodiless selves, toward the whites of their eyes. Parents escorted children to streetcorners and then threw up their mental hands: no further. A street signal would change and at red a straggling child would pause in mid, immature stride to hop back onto the concrete precipice. Behind him soon would collect first one, then three, then many children, like a cold hose stopped up with one white wrinkled finger, the sound of high voices rising, tiny hands and dimple- wrists flying, and then finally green would unleash another mad scamper across the wide but fading double white lines, now almost black.

Sean Page and Martin squeezed through the doors. They were both slightly overweight and with Martin's shoulders and Sean's tummy they left a smear against the glass as they entered. Both wore dirty jeans, and above sneakers that smelled of sweat and old rubber were rolled-up cuffs in which resided whole portions of their autobiographies: lint, ocean sand, molecular

pebbles, and the dried excavations of their mutual noses. Sean wore a red shirt with a disorderly pattern of white and black lines. It failed to overwhelm his stomach, and the square-edged bottom flapped outside his pants, exposing the curling edge of a t-shirt. On his face an indiscriminating smile of pleasure revealed crooked teeth over a sharp chin. His black hair was crew cut into sharp points. Martin was filthy with rebellious dirt that posed an argument. They each gave fifty-five cents (oh, this was years ago!) to a blonde young woman dressed as a leprechaun, in a fresh tweed suit and a long white pipe in her vest pocket.

The undiminished energy of children in the lobby was worse, being enclosed and multiplied by mirrors, and being more concerned with their petty puerilities, they were indifferent to the theater around them: the high arches; the minute etchings along the wall above the plastic-cushioned doors; the damp, dismal ceiling, peeling, an array of gray, discolored, solitary souls posing in Arabian attire; the half-columns in the wall, as if the room had been planned and built around the preexistent pillars; the elaborate light fixtures hanging from the ceiling, with black wrought-iron curlicues and little red windows; and below in loud loose groups, indifferent kids, some running from cluster to cluster, others throwing little bits of candy and wrapping at the solemn, broad back of the manager.

Sean and Martin had brought their own candy, and so did not have to stand waiting



evolution of a benevolent desire.

During the first intermission, while waiting in the small, dirty bathroom, Sean and Martin talked about the movie as best they could amid the hollow swishing of wet porcelain and tinny wild voices. Both of them liked it, liked it a lot, and each of them wondered, suggesting it tentatively, and looking for signs that indicated one was thinking the other weird, if they should stay and watch it again. Yes, yes, they both agreed, and did stay through two more features and cartoons and trailers and finally the main feature once more, and when they had awakened from their rapture and returned with a more orderly crowd out through the immense glass doors, they saw that it was very, very dark. They looked at each other simultaneously with mirrored expressions of wide eyes, taut throats, and open mouths of, Oh boy, are we in trouble.

— Sean, Martin begged, you've got to walk me home. My Dad won't beat me if he sees you're there.

— What about my Dad? Sean asked.

— I don't know. I just know that I don't want to get beat. Come on. Please. I'll do something for you sometime.

In fact, he had already done something for Sean. The two of them had a history of making trouble together, and once Martin had taken the blame for something they had both done, although it had been wholly Martin's idea. They had taken several rare silver dollars from the collection of Martin's father. The coins had been hidden in a bureau drawer, and the boys had snuck in and taken them, and with the modest sense of values children have, bought several dollars worth of candy and gum and tattoos and wax lips. The gastronomical aftermath for Sean was long and hot. His stomach became an iron organ pulling gravitationally however which way he lay. Martin was the wicked boy who received all the punishment, much to what relief Sean was capable of, and Martin had refused to snitch on him.

— Yeah, I'll go home with you.

They stepped forward into the silent, dark side streets. Soon, still silent, they passed the gloom of the small lumber yard with its isolated flood lights shining mute illumination on the piles of fresh lumber. Sean smelled the strong aroma of sawdust, and his eyes watered. A little way to the west, on the river, ships were passing slowly through the raised bridges. He wanted to hear a foghorn that would not be lost in the multitude of cold, ignorant sounds that, truth be told, should be made to part and stand at attention as the dull luminox of a soulful signal dragged its feet, stoop-shouldered, to his ear.

A bus stopped in front of them and deposited a passenger in a hiss of unfolding doors, revved up, and reentered traffic, leaving behind the odd stench of its exhaust. They crossed Lincoln Street at a run, smudged silhouettes in the hard headlights,

and were submerged again in neighborhoodly blackness. Martin became more nervous as they approached his solitary, flat, white house, and he picked up a long limb to tap ritualistically for luck on every other square of the sidewalk. Sean felt unusually elated. The knowledge of his upcoming ordeal made more exquisite the shadows and sensual wisps around him: the tiny porch lights; that springing, shiny cat; the red wagon across a walkway with its handle and front wheels inevitably turned to the left or right; and finally, the frozen holocaust of limbs backlit by a street lamp.

— Come up to the door with me, will you?

Martin's face was pale and he could not disguise the uneasiness in his voice and body. They did not talk as they went up the steps, nor did they pause for a hushed goodbye or to check for a cleared coast. Martin reached for the brass knob of the heavy oak door and pushed. The door opened in all its creakiness — and then Martin vanished. Sean saw through torn crinoline that he had been pulled through the opening with a stern yank by his father. There was a murmured plea, a slap, a cry, the door was kicked shut, and the sounds the door scissored off would have only been deeper, darker reflections of the initial slap, that penultimate cry.

Sean stood gaping, then backed down the steps from the gap-toothed porch. He looked around at the now menacing streets, or rather, the ghost left in his vacuum looked, for now Sean was fleeing down the street. The wind boxed his ears, his beating heart nipped at his heels, and he was abnormally conscious of his buttocks. As he panted, as he ran, his mind tried to fabricate some excuse, some credible reason for his tardiness that he could burst out with before having to face parental disapproval and violence. He fought down the vile emesis brought on by his heavy breathing and algor. As he passed a fenced dog it thrust its pointed jaw through the white planks and barked through its sharp yellow teeth. Sean ran across the street, startled, and within the confines of its prison-yard the dog ran with him, barking and leaping until trapped in the corner. The growls of the ghoul joined the avalanche behind him, biting through the seashell rush of air around his ears. The sweat rolled down from his armpits and from his brow, his feet hurt, his chest flab bounced, and occasionally as he ran he would dip towards the blacktop with weakening knees of fear. His face contorted itself as if to cry, but he did not. In the dimly illuminated sky above he saw moving and merging clouds of rain stifled perhaps by some last regret...

But I take pity on him. I cannot watch his race against fear, and turn my head away with closed eyes. I have grown to like him in all his inchoate tenderness and perceptiveness. I sense a little of myself in him and a little of people I know. And yet, I can't help feeling that I fear more for his

future than he himself does. Is he too young to see this as a microcosm of his tiny being's doom, and of the ultimate arbiter of human passion, terrible death itself? I look back to Sean with my well-composed, sad and pitying eyes — and he is gone, swallowed by the crepe houses, the cardboard streets.

I search for him up and down 37th, past Salmon and Taylor, as far down as Main, and up to 39th, but he has vanished. I listen hopefully for the staccato of his footfalls, but there is nothing save the lonely passing car or the click of a street signal. Now I am eager to finish what is impossible without him. I wonder how this could have happened, and my anxiety is coupled with a desire to know, to continue to know, what he thinks and feels. Though I am embarrassed that such a development should occur, nonetheless, my thoughts, as always, are with him.

And then, finally, I see his fleeing form before me, and I swoop down to be near him, keeping a dignified distance. He has come to a frozen halt before his own house and its unshaved yard, spare tire, torn couch, and peeling paint.

With momentarily closed eyes and a brief prayer, Sean walked up the steps with enforced calm and entered. The small hallway where his brothers had left their soiled shoestringless shoes and smelly stained coats filled him with dread, and a sadness that stood in union with it. His feet moved him from the scuffed, dull floor to the circular, ribbed rug that lay like the slice of an old multicolored tree. He heard his father rearrange his ill bulk on the bumpy pink chair, and a pounding flush of blood hit his eyes, clearing away his senses before the relentless sharpness of reality.

His father turned from the small black and white television.

— Where've you been?

— We stayed to watch the movie twice. It was really good.

— Weren't you told to be home before dark?

— Yes, sir.

— Well, don't do it again. We almost called the police. Now go upstairs and get ready for bed.

— Sure, Dad.

His relief was mixed with puzzlement, but he went upstairs and went to sleep and forgot about everything that had happened that day when new ones had arrived.

#### Our Last Issue

Bulle's last name is, of course, spelled "Ogier."

Also, it is Jean-Pierre Gorin, not "Jean-Paul."

The idea of "open" and "closed" films, discussed on page 48 has also been developed by Leo Braudy in his book *The World Within a Frame* (Anchor Press) page 49.



Norman Grace offers as an antidote to his discussion of last issue's coffee commercial the PSA against drunken driving aired throughout the country. He writes: "According to my sources there was a study done by the research section of the USC film department in 1951 or '52, in which it was shown that warnings about careful driving were more effective if they portrayed the human side of the tragedy, rather than showing gore. The current commercial to which I refer follows this guideline. It shows a man and a woman on a beach, while an optimistic and well-written song is sung representing the young woman's ambitions. Freeze, and she becomes a photograph on a wall, as an announcer tells us that she was killed on a lonely road by a drunken driver. Yes it is manipulative, but for a worthy cause — and, as I never tire of repeating, what *isn't* manipulative, including these very words I write? If the words did not seem so oxymoronic, I would say this is a beautiful commercial."

**Next issue and forthcoming:**

*Hardcore*; *The Deerhunter*; John Carpenter; Jeff Leiber; *Lolita*; Gloria Heifetz on early sixties bedroom farce; Polanski; *Barry Lyndon*; Resnais; Fellini; Truffaut; incorrect subtitles in Japanese films; and more.

**Contributors:** Ken Alakine is preparing an article on the increasingly right-wing drift of Hollywood movies; Phillip Blomberg was recently married (12/29/78) to Juliet Thorpe and continues to live in L.A.; William Cadbury has his degrees from Harvard University and the University of Wisconsin. He teaches film theory and criticism at the newly formed Film Studies area of the Department of Speech at the University of Oregon. He counts as especially important for his intellectual development the year he spent as a post-doctoral Fellow in the Research Laboratory of Electronics at MIT; David Coursen's articles have appeared in *Sight and Sound* and *Take One*; Daniel Deprez is a free-lance music critic and humorist; Norman Hale is a free-lance writer living in L.A., where he is also working on a screenplay and various teleplays; Gloria Heifetz is working on a study of sixties bedroom farce; Tom Hyde studies film and teaches in Eugene, Oregon; Johannes Lucas is writing a long novel tentatively called *Empty Street*; Leland Poague, who teaches English and Film at Iowa State University, has written books on Frank Capra and Ernst Lubitsch, both published by A.S. Barnes, who also plan to publish his forthcoming book on Billy Wilder and Leo McCarey; Charles Schwenk is a Doctoral student and Associate Instructor at Indiana University School of Business. He has made several short films, including *Elements*, *A Day in the Life of Millard Fillmore*, *Man in a Skinner Box*, a film about UFO's called *Why Won't They Leave Us Alone*, and *Quotations from the Book of Ecclesiastes*, about the death of his father.







*A Wedding*, page 30

*Suspiria*, page 55



*City Girl*, page 15

